

Mother Tongue as a Tool for Repositioning Childhood Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

The advent of private schools where emphasis is strongly laid on the use of second language as a medium of instruction in lieu of mother tongue as stated by National policy on education has made the policy ineffective. It is discovered that pupils have lost the grassroots and unable to conceptualize deeply. 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, using Yoruba as a case study. It is concluded that teachers are not conversant with the mother tongue they are to use for instructions; parents discourage their children from speaking in their mother tongue at home and everywhere. . It is suggested that government should employed competent teachers in mother tongue of instruction in a particular environment; emphasis should be laid on training of teachers while parents, traditional rulers and society should be sensitized.

Keywords:

Mother tongue,
Early childhood,
Repositioning,
Global
competitiveness

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Background to the Study

It is established mother tongue is of utmost importance for building solid foundation in learners especially when it starts from the grass root which is Early Childhood Education. Mother Tongue is the first language that a child acquired. Thus, it can be described as native language of a child. The medium of instruction in preprimary and primary school shall be the language of the immediate environment which is called mother tongue for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment shall be taught as a subject (FRN 2014). This provision simply implies that at the preprimary and lower primary school (i.e. Play group, kindergarten, nursery and primary 1-3) with the fact that the child has be brought up with his/her mother tongue from infancy, the medium of instruction for all subjects shall be the mother tongue (MT) but in the upper primary school (i.e. primary 4-6), the medium of instruction shall be in English language. UNESCO also has encouraged mother tongue instruction in primary education since 1953 (UNESCO,1953) and UNESCO highlights the advantages of mother tongue education.

Children whose primary language is not the language of instruction in school are more likely to drop out of school or fail in early grades. Research has shown that children's first language is the optimal language for literacy and learning throughout primary school (UNESCO, 2008), children are more likely to enroll and succeed in school (Kosonen, 2005); parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children's learning (Benson, 2002); girls and rural children with less exposure to a dominant language stay in school longer and repeat grades less often (Hovens, 2002; UNESCO Bangkok, 2005);

Early Childhood Education is very essential in the life of a child's hence the recent focus on its desirability across the globe. It provides for children whose age bracket is from 0- 8 years. A period described by Osanyin (2002) as extremely crucial to an individual's intellectual, emotional, social and physical development. This are the most impressionable years as they lay the foundation for the development of the human personality. More so, it is a stratum which the Mother Tongue (MT) will make a significant impression in the life of the young ones. Mother tongue, as the term suggests, is closest to a person's heart. Like mother's touch and mother's milk, it can never find a substitute. To this end, modern psychology also lays tremendous stress on a child's connection with the mother tongue. Having realized the significance of the mother tongue advantage, parents have started initiating their children in their native and natural language. Early Childhood Education is very essential in the life of a child's hence the recent focus on its desirability across the globe. It provides for children whose age bracket is from 0- 8 years. A period described by Osanyin (2002) as extremely crucial to an individual's intellectual, emotional, social and physical development. This are the most impressionable years as they lay the foundation for the development of the human

personality. More so, it is a stratum which the Mother Tongue (MT) will make a significant impression in the life of the young ones. Mother tongue, as the term suggests, is closest to a person's heart. Like mother's touch and mother's milk, it can never find a substitute. To this end, modern psychology also lays tremendous stress on a child's connection with the mother tongue. Having realized the significance of the mother tongue advantage, there is need to reposition early childhood education through the medium of mother tongue for effective creative thinking which would be eventually be useful globally.

English is taught as a subject at all level while the indigenous languages largely suffer neglect and are mostly restricted to their domains or regions of use (Adegbija, 2004). In fact of all the indigenous languages only three have been recognized to be taught within the school system that is Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo largely for socio- political relevance. The 'Ife Six-Year Primary Project' was designed to use Yoruba language as a medium of instruction in primary schools in Osun State of Nigeria. This project was based on the premise that: (a). the child will benefit culturally, socially, linguistically and cognitively. (b). the child's command of English will be improved if he is taught English as an entirely separate subject by a specialist teacher through the six years and it was since been suggested that the language of the immediate environment that is Yoruba (mother tongue) be adopted as the medium of instruction throughout the six-year period of primary education

In the case of Early Childhood Education, the National Policy on Education (NPE 2004), section 1 (10) mentions that government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preservation of cultures. Thus every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity, it is expedient that every child be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Section 2 (14) (c) stipulates that government shall ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. Section 4 (19) (e) stipulates that the medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. Maduwesi (1999) mentions the two reasons why the pronouncement of the National policy had not been taken seriously. Firstly, a foremost expectation of Nursery schools is to teach the young child the English language which is the preferred language of the parents and since the schools are private establishments, the proprietors have to please their clients or they would lose patronage. Secondly, it appears unrealistic as long as English language remains the National language and the language of business and transaction.

Oderinde (2007) strongly acceded to the ideas expressed above by Maduwesi, and warned why English is taught as a subject at all level while the indigenous languages largely suffer neglect and are mostly restricted to their domains or regions of use (Adegbija, 2004). In fact of all the indigenous languages only three have been recognized to be taught within the school system that is Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo largely for socio-

political relevance.. The context of looking at English expression as class have led to most of the Nigerian elites in Nigeria speaking more English to their kindergarten children than the mother tongue at home. The situation as observed by Ogbona (2006) tend to have led to huge imbalance in bilingualism involving English and Nigerian languages to the extent that many educated Nigerians cannot read or write in their Modern Tongue.

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- iii) The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. (FRN 2014)

Importance of Mother Tongue

The overall national objectives among others is to develop and project Nigerian culture, art and languages as well as the world's cultural heritage and to foster Nigerian unity with an emphasis on the common ties that unite us in our diversity. Also, Federal Government has realized the importance of MT in the education of a Nigerian child and has declared that children should receive the early stages of education in mother tongue before changing to a foreign language. Any education system relies on a network of interactions between and among parents, teachers, students and community members is of tremendous advantage to overall development of a child.. These interactions are influenced by many factors amongst which are the socio, language values and culture of the people. Unfortunately, acceptance of English language as medium of instruction in early childhood classes is denying us as a nation the opportunity of introducing our culture and ways of life to the young ones in the mother tongue. The current trend in many homes particularly in the urban centre is that many parents communicate with their children in English rather than the mother tongues. A child who is not able to speak English language fluently is regarded as a failure and a disgrace to the family as such every parent wants to belong to this class of elites.

A child is psychologically balanced in the continued use of Mother Tongue as a medium of instruction and interaction. It is the language in which he dreams, thinks and he can easily express his feelings and emotions. Apart, Mother tongue is also the language of culture of all the elements that characterised a linguistic group and distinguish them from other groups, in all spheres of life, the most central is language. Language and culture are inseparable and to separate a child from his language and culture at an early stage of his school education is to make him have no regard for his culture. This does not only create a barrier between the child and his less educated parents or acquaintances but cause the

child to despise his mother tongue in favour of foreign language which is English in the Nigerian context.

Early Childhood Education and Language Policy in Nigeria

Early childhood education refers to a wide range of programs all aimed at the physical, cognitive and social development of children before they enter primary school. It is well established that many things children learn at this stage in life remain with them and form their future being. The effects of what happens during the earliest years of a child's life can last a lifetime. All the goals of Early childhood Education as regards emotion, intelligence, confidence, curiosity, self-control, relatedness, ability to communicate and cooperativeness that determine how a child learns and relates in school and in the society in general depend on the kind of early care and education he/she receives from parents, preschool teachers and caregivers.

The beginning of formalized nursery education in Nigeria is dated back to the 19th century when several efforts were made by the missionaries to introduce Western Education into Nigeria. In an attempt to re-establish education on the right course, a national seminar on education was organized in 1973 titled "national policy on education" (Maduewesi, 1998). The policy was limited to the formulation of policy issues which include the regulating and control of the operation of early childhood education. In 1979, the Nigerian policy on education appreciated the importance of early child education and linked it with the educational performance in primary school. The Revised National Policy on Education 1981 gave a great deal of importance to early child education. It viewed this type of care and education as the important input in human resources development. This is because it came clear to the government that when young children are taken care of in a pre-school environment the primary school will be fed with experienced pupils who are ready to learn in a formal school environment. In the 2004 edition of the national policy on education, section two of the policy document is set aside for early childhood and education. Subsection 13 of section two details with the purpose for early childhood education. The purpose includes:

1. Effect a smooth transition from the home to the school.
2. Provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the market, offices etc)
3. Repositioning Early Childhood Education for Functional Education, Values, Knowledge, Skills and National Development
4. Prepare the child the primary level of education - Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity, through exploration of nature and environment, art, music and playing with toys.
5. Inculcate social norms
6. Develop a sense of cooperation and team spirit
7. Learn good habits especially good health habits and rules of hygiene, eating of balanced diet
8. Teach the rudiments of numbers, letter, colour, shapes and forms.

All these activities would be carried out through the medium of mother tongue. Eweniyi (2000) and Banjo (2005) reported that nursery and elementary school owners have a negative perception of the use of mother tongue, that majority of the children taught in mother tongue develop inferior complex in the presence of children receiving lessons in English language. Elites are fond of sending their children to private where emphasis is on English language as a medium of instruction., Thus rendering a child an alien in his environment. There is therefore a need to reposition early childhood education using Mother tongue as a viable tool to bring the policy, parents, teachers and the community to fruition.

Global Competitiveness

Once a child is competent in mother tongue, he is balanced, confident, and able to conceptualize and translate the acquired language to understand the knowledge learnt. Mother tongue is basically cultural issues, not only the language but there are arts, trades, dance; certain trades are attached to certain artworks having language and registered words attached to them. China is now in the global world for mobile phones, air conditioners television (plasma, flatron), toys etc The knowledge is transmitted to their children in their mother tongue in order to preserve their discoveries. Germany is also known for Mercedes Benz, Japan is known for Toyota vehicles so, developing worlds as Nigeria should train their children to discover a treasure which will take their countries to the top, this can be done by widen their horizon using their mother tongue as a medium of instruction especially in the early stages of their education.

Conclusion

Teachers are not conversant with mother tongue being in use. Parents lay more emphasis on the speaking of English language which is being used everywhere, this makes children to lose touch with their background, They have little or nothing about English language and as a result of this, they are unable to develop academic self confidence.

Recommendations

1. A national policy allowing and supporting mother tongue based early childhood programs must invest in training candidates who are fluent in the mother tongue. These fluent and trained early childhood practitioners can play primary roles in infant and child development and family support programs
2. Good pedagogy is responsive to local needs and goals for children. According to Baker (1996), the rationale behind language education is based on perceived priorities. Parents need to be assisted, through parent education, demonstration projects, and community-Infant development workers, home visitors, family daycare providers, and early childhood educators need training, ongoing professional development, and resources to encourage parents on mother tongue education in early childhood education.
3. Teachers should have basic knowledge of the language/ mother tongue and the culture of the language of instruction.

4. Government should employ teachers who are competent in not only teaching but in speaking the mother tongue.
5. Emphasis should be on training and re-training of teachers on the use of mother tongue education in early childhood education.
6. Parents, society including the traditional rulers should be sensitized on the benefits of mother tongue education.
7. Through Parent – teacher association, parents should be advised to use mother tongue often to converse with their children at home.

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