



Challenges in the Implimentation of Mother Tongue Education in Nigerian Schools: the Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at pre-primary and primary levels of education is very vital for educational development of our children. Researches have shown that the child learns better and quicker his mother tongue is used in instruction than using a foreign language (English). This paper discusses the provision made by national policy on education (NPE) on the relevance and importance of mother tongue in education. It also highlights the benefit of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at both pre-primary and primary levels. In addition, the challenges of implementation of mother tongue education are not left un discussed, the effective way to the implementation of mother tongue education in Nigeria, finally followed by the conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Instruction based on mother tongue includes the child's first language (L1), which is the language they learned the first time in their life. Instruction based on mother tongue includes the child using their first language before gradually moving to a second language (L2) or a foreign language at a certain point during primary school (Nyanged, Ambiyu, 2014). The choice of language for instruction plays a vital role in education at all levels, acting as the gateway to learning, particularly in primary education where many children encounter formal education for the first time. It is generally believed that a child's creativity is nurtured when they are introduced to a language they are already familiar with in school. Conversely, exposure to an unfamiliar language at school may stifle a child's innovative spirit (Olagoke, 1997 In Simeon, 2014).

Since the introduction of Western education in Nigeria, the medium of instruction has been a big concern for various governments and education-related agencies. The main goal is to ensure that children receive instruction in the most appropriate language, especially at the initial stages of learning, namely pre-primary and primary school levels. The use of mother tongue in education in Nigeria dates back to the beginning of Western education in the country. This practice has historical roots because, at the lowest levels of basic education, even the colonial masters favored the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction. There are many issues and difficulties with using mother tongue as the primary language of instruction in the Nigerian educational system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Provision of National Policy on Education (NPE)

The National Policy on Education (NPE), which was first published in 1997 and later updated in 2016, clearly states that language is important in the educational system. For pre-primary education, the policy says:

“The government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community.” Similarly, the policy emphasizes the importance of language in primary education.

“The government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is first the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and, later on, English” (NPE, paragraph 15 (4) primary education). Section 3:15 of the same document further reinforces this by stating:

“At the primary level, the government will see to it that the medium of instruction is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, and at a later stage, English.”

From these policy statements for both pre-primary and primary levels, it is clear that the policy recognizes the importance and suitability of the mother tongue for children. Additionally, the policy mandates the use of English to support the mother tongue at a later stage, but notably, for pre-primary children.

Mother Tongue

Different academics have defined "mother tongue" (MT) in different ways. According to Mills (2000), a child's mother tongue can be defined as their first language, the language they speak at home, the language they are most fluent in, or the language of their community. Comparably, Simeon (2007) raises some debate about the Nigerian setting by endorsing Mills's definition and speculating that there may be Nigerian children whose mother tongue is English. He cites the Biron children in Plateau state, for example, who may believe Hausa to be their mother tongue rather than Biron.

Mother tongue is defined as the "language which a person acquires in the early years and which normally becomes his natural instrument of thought and communication" by UNESCO (1963, as cited in Simeon, 2007). According to UNESCO, a kid's mother tongue need not always be the language that their parents speak or the first language they acquire because unique situations may cause the child to give up on their mother tongue more or less entirely at a young age. Mother tongue can also include the language used at home, which is sometimes referred to as the child's "home language" and can take various forms, including the language of the indigenous people.

METHODOLOGY

The paper emphasizes the crucial role of utilizing the mother tongue as the primary medium of instruction in early childhood and primary education to foster the educational development of our children. Research indicates that children demonstrate improved and swifter learning when instructed in their native language as opposed to a foreign language, such as English. The document delves into an examination of the provisions outlined in the national policy on education (NPE) concerning the significance and relevance of incorporating the mother tongue in the educational process. It underscores the advantages associated with employing the mother tongue as the instructional medium in both pre-primary and primary education levels. Furthermore, the paper addresses the challenges associated with implementing mother tongue education, presenting a discussion on effective strategies for the implementation of mother tongue education in Nigeria, concluding with a summary of key findings.

RESEARCH RESULT

Concept of Mother Tongue Education

The notion of Mother Tongue Education requires clarification in this particular context. In the Nigerian context, Mother Tongue Education involves teaching all academic subjects, except English, using the child's native language as the medium of instruction from primary one to primary six. In this approach, English is designated as a distinct subject. However, in accordance with the national policy on education, the provision for mother tongue education is restricted to serving as the language of instruction solely at pre-primary and lower primary levels, with the introduction of English as the medium of instruction at a later stage.

For the purposes of this paper, Mother Tongue Education is construed as the instruction of all academic subjects (excluding English) using the child's mother tongue or native language as the medium of instruction from primary one to six.

Benefit of Mother Tongue Education on the education of Nigeria child

Mother Tongue Education holds significant importance in a child's educational development for various reasons. To begin with, research conducted over an eight-year life project from 1970 to 1978 by Odumah (2007) indicates that a child learns more effectively in their mother tongue. This preference is attributed to the familiarity of the language, as it is the one the child is accustomed to at home, during play, and often serves as the language of instruction and socialization. The school environment further aids in refining the child's proficiency in these indigenous languages.

Furthermore, compared to learning concepts in a second or foreign language, children find that learning things in their native tongues helps them understand them better (Folasade, 2012). According to the notion, introducing unfamiliar concepts to a youngster through adaptation and translation into their own language improves their learning process. Furthermore, a 1953 UNESCO report highlights the value of mother tongue education and its good effects on the learning process:

Psychologically, it goes without saying that a child's mother tongue is the finest medium for instruction; it is a set of meaningful indicators that his mind uses on autopilot for expression and comprehension. Socially, it is in the ways that individuals within the community they belong to identify with one another. A child learns at school more quickly when using their mother tongue than when using a foreign language

The ideal scenario in educational development is the adoption of mother tongue education, a practice followed by all developed nations globally. Examples include Japan, the USA, Norway, and Russia, as well as certain developing countries like China, India, South Korea, and Malaysia. Folasade (2012) further emphasizes that a bilingual child benefits the most from their mother tongue during the formative stages of life. It serves as the primary means through which attitudes and aptitudes are most effectively developed. It is crucial to encourage children, especially during their initial twelve years, to master their mother tongue for the positive development of their physical, mental, and intellectual potentials.

In addition, a number of academics from Nigeria, like Chumbow (1990) and Cummins (2005), support the use of mother tongue in primary education. The noteworthy six-year Ife primary education initiative is frequently cited by proponents of mother tongue education in Nigeria as proof of the usefulness of the program there. The project's goal was to show that teaching primary school students in their mother tongue produces superior outcomes than the current method of teaching upper primary students English instead of their mother tongue. The project's findings showed that students who were taught in their mother tongue did better than those who were taught in English (Simeon, 2007).

DISCUSSION

Challenges in the Implementation of Mother Tongue Education

- Considering the preceding discussion highlighting the significance of a child's mother tongue education and the findings indicating that pupils exhibit better learning outcomes when instructed in their native language compared to using English as the medium of instruction, along with the national policy on education emphasizing the use of the mother tongue in pre-primary and lower primary levels in Nigeria, it is noteworthy that the practical implementation of mother tongue education encounters numerous challenges due to inadequate execution
- The attitude of Nigerians is usually that of scorn what is indigenous and warm embrace for what is foreign. This is one of the reasons why most parents of children at nursery or pre-primary level particularly the private own ones prefer the use of English as a medium of instruction for their children instead of mother tongue. The supervisors of instruction at primary and secondary schools do not bother themselves about what is going on in the private schools, they tract their visits to only public schools. Furthermore, most parents are of the belief that English as a foreign and international language is a vehicle of gaining employment and a ladder for social status, they therefore see mother tongue as a medium of instruction is at the disadvantage of their children in the sense that it is not recognized language internationally.
- Another challenge is the lack of qualified professional teachers to teach indigenous languages. Most teachers are not professionally grounded in the mother tongue education that they are expected to teach. The teachers may also have come from different language environment from that of their class children. And the remuneration is very low and therefore these teacher slack the motivation and zealot put in their best (Akindele, 2005).
- Funding is another challenge that hinders the implementation of mother tongue education. The provision of necessary materials, facilities, and equipment is poorly inadequate. There are insufficient textbooks, reader and other literacy materials in schools handle mother tongue education properly. It is generally observed that many primary schools do not have library and where is available it is ill-equipped. Furthermore, book production in the indigenous languages is quantitatively far less than in English. Bangbose,1992 has stressed that some problems faced by mother tongue education for primary education are multiplicity of languages, lack of teachers, textbooks multilingualism or Multilanguage, orthography, and pressure of hetenogeneity in the classroom especially in the urban areas. More so, lack of awareness on the part of the highly placed ministry officials, supervisors, inspectors of education, principals, headmasters, teachers and practicing teachers of language policy as stated in National Policy on Education
- The prevalence of English as the official language in Nigeria poses a challenge, contributing to the perceived inferiority of indigenous languages. According to Oyetade (1992), English has not only become the official

language in Nigeria but also holds dominance in education, administration from the federal to local government levels, commerce, and politics, being extensively used in its written form. Igboanusi and Peter (2005:11) further highlight that the overwhelming dominance of English extends to various domains, including government, education, mass media, parliament, judiciary (excluding sharia courts), science and technology, and literary creativity. Additionally, English serves as the language for inter-ethnic communication in Nigeria. This widespread influence of English in almost all aspects of Nigerian activities diminishes the prominence of indigenous languages in the eyes of elites and government stakeholders, resulting in a reluctance to properly implement mother tongue education in the country.

The Way Forward

For mother tongue education to have a successful implementation in Nigerian education system, the following need to observe:

- Adequate fund need to be provided by the government and other agencies for primary level of education for the purchase of adequate facilities and equipment such as textbooks, and possibly well equipped library for indigenous language materials for effective implementation of mother tongue education.
- Government should employ professionally indigenous language teachers in primary schools and retrain them through workshops, seminars to get them more qualified. This should be accompanied by high remunerations for the teachers to motivate them to have the zest and zeal in carrying out their duty (ies) effectively.
- Effort should be made by the government to develop positive attitude towards indigenous language among Nigerians particularly the elites. In other words. People in Nigeria should be made to be aware of the importance of mother tongue to the education of their children at primary school levels.
- A deliberate policy is necessary to prepare Nigerian languages for primary education through careful planning, standardization, the development of appropriate materials, and training for teachers.
- Every local government education authority should assign its supervisory unit the task of closely monitoring the implementation of mother tongue education. Additionally, parents who opt for their children to be instructed in English during pre-primary and primary levels should be informed that the Nigerian constitution and policy statements apply to all citizens. Therefore, stakeholders in the education sector need to ensure the complete integration of mother tongue education at both pre-primary and primary levels.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Using mother tongue of the child (L1) AS a medium of instruction in education at formative stage of child's life is very important to child education. There should proper implementation of the policy such that proper result will

be yield. Teachers need to be trained, parents and community members be encouraged to change their attitudes towards accepting indigenous languages to be used in teaching their wards. Let them be aware that teaching their wards using the indigenous language is better than using English language as a medium of instruction for effective development of education and the learning efficiency of their children which they prefer.

The following will form some food for thought:

- encourage active participation and involvement of various bodies (e.g. the community and other partners)
- Legitimize the languages within the school and making them compulsory for all. No certificate without them.
- Respect local languages by giving them pride of place in the scheme of things and enrich them.
- For Nigerian languages to be teaching tools, they must go beyond just describing the legend of the forest and be able to handle things such as scientific plant evaluation and the green house affect (UNESCO, 2003).
- Children should be made to share languages in the class.(E.g.a child is made to bring one word from home language in to the class and the entire lass learners and discusses that word).
- Terminological database have to be compiled to review all the words and expressions in it. Then invent new words to describe the legal commercial, diplomatic, and technical aspects of modern life.
- Children should be encouraged to write in their mother tongue in addition to the majority school language. They can be made to write and publish pupils- authored bilingual books, pamphlets, magazines, etc.
- The government should be ready and willing to mount campaign on and enforce the use of the language policy on Nigerians.
- The government should also provide adequate funds for the policy to succeed.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

The use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in pre-primary and primary education is essential for the educational development of children. The provisions made by the national policy on education (NPE) highlight the relevance and importance of mother tongue in education. The benefits of using mother tongue as a medium of instruction are numerous, including improved learning outcomes and academic performance. However, there are challenges in implementing mother tongue education, which can be overcome through effective strategies and solutions. It is crucial for policymakers and educators in Nigeria to prioritize and promote the use of mother tongue in education to ensure the holistic development of children.

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