

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract

The importance of education to humanity can never be over emphasized; it is against this backdrop that emphasis is being laid on the education of a child who is the future leader. Government at all levels and organizations all over the world have reiterated their commitment in education, especially that of children and youths, but in doing so effectively, attention must also be given to the medium of instruction, determining what language will be used to teach the students is one of the important factors to be considered in childhood education. Many researchers, educationists and other stakeholders have spent enormous time, energy and resources enumerating and emphasizing the importance of education to the child with little emphasis on the medium of instruction. This paper discusses the concept of mother tongue and significance of childhood education. The paper also highlights significance of mother tongue in childhood education. An important part of this paper also explores the use of mother tongue based education. Finally, the paper made some suggestions for the school administrators, class managers and government.

Keywords: medium of instruction, mother tongue, childhood education, first language, second language.

Introduction

By the year 2015, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and over one hundred and fifty nations of the world pledged to provide Universal Basic Education to all children. Their specific goal was to ensure that by 2015, all children particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality (UNESCO, 2000). Knowledge is acquired through the mother tongue or indigenous

languages. It is a means of transmitting most forms of Nigerian tradition social life. Just as the aim of education is the development of the child, indigenous language or mother tongue helps to complete this development. Ebe (2003) acknowledged the value of the mother tongue when he assets that:

the need arises that every Nigeria citizen should all go out to get well groomed in his indigenous language. This will no doubt make him acquire to a very great extent all the traditional know-how of his people since all forms of traditional education are transmitted through the indigenous language. Hence, the Nigeria philosophy of education is based on the integration into a sound and effective citizen (p.143).

Concept of Mother Tongue

Alabi, Adebisi and Olatayo (2008, p. 67) explains the concept of mother tongue as follows: 'First language or mother tongue or better still native language is the only language of a monolingual person which is acquired naturally in his native environment and which meets all his linguistic needs'.

From this explanation, we can infer that every human being is first a monolingual before becoming a bilingual. It is with the mother tongue that the child first conceptualizes the world. Language is an indispensable factor in the meaningful existence of man. It is a unique factor that distinguishes man from other creatures. It establishes man as a social being who not only uses language as a vehicle of social, cultural transmission but also as a means of knowledge advancement and educational development. Man can be said to be dead without a language and because of this necessity, a child, out of compulsion, acquires a language at birth, and this is called the mother tongue or the first language (L1) of the child.

According to the UNESCO report of 1953, instructions received in the mother tongue are easily assimilated and permanent than those received in a foreign language. Fafunwa (1975) is of the opinion that a child taught in a language that he is not familiar with can develop skills with trauma. He believes that mother tongue is a base for learning subsequent languages and it also facilitates understanding, internalization of concepts and continuity in thinking. Also, corroborating this assertion, Opoola (2002, p.142) noted that: The proper development of the child is closely bound with the continued use of the language he has from birth, the language of his parents, brothers, sisters, friends and people he is used to. It is the language in which he has acquired his first experience of life.

However, the results of the study conducted by *Alabi, et al. (2008)* differs a little when he investigated on the impact of three alternative languages as a medium of instruction in learning some science concepts. He found out that the use of the mother tongue combined with English Language was more effective than the use of either of the two singly. Researchers have also shown that children who begin their education using their mother tongue are more confident and learn better than those who are made to learn in a second language in their early years (Apanpa, 2009 and Lawal, 2009). This is due to the fact that when the school builds on the foundation of the mother tongue (MT) for teaching a second or third language, the chance of successful education is brighter. Ife six year project by Fafunwa (1975) supports this. The role of the mother tongue to ensure a resourceful educational system is also appreciated in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, (2004) paragraph

15(3). According to the policy, the Nigeria government states the objectives of pre-primary education received in the mother tongue thus "Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community". Also, in paragraph 15 sections 4 of the National Policy on Education (NPE), the objectives of primary education received in the mother tongue are stated thus: "Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary schools is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. There is no gainsaying that mother tongue education is a tonic to keep alive the intellectual potential of every child (Alabi et. al 2008).

Despite the significance of the mother tongue highlighted above, research has shown that many Nigerians prefer to speak and communicate in their second language which is English Language than their mother tongue. Most parents also prefer to communicate with their children in English Language thereby depriving them of cultural emancipation, intellectual depth and mental resourcefulness. Oyeleye and Olateju (2003) rightly noted that there is a discrepancy in the language of instruction being used in our private and public primary schools. They asserted that "everywhere in Nigeria, the medium of instruction in our nursery and primary schools is English". The languages of the immediate environment are not used. In private primary schools indigenous languages are labeled as vernaculars and pupils are punished or rebuked for speaking in any of these languages. According to the NPE, the philosophy of Nigeria's education is based on the belief that every Nigeria shall have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of gender, religion, ethnic background and social status. It also went further to say that every child shall learn one of the three indigenous Nigerian languages - Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo.

In his view, Akumabor (2010) explains that when schools give children quality education in their primary language (MT) they give them two things: knowledge and literacy. It is his belief that the knowledge that children get through their first language helps make the English they hear and read more comprehensible. According to him, literacy developed in the primary language transfers naturally to the second language thereby making children learn to read getting the meaning of what they read. The use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in primary schools is then imperative and should be made compulsory at the primary education level.

Significance of Childhood Education

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. These 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 (www.google.com 2008).

The significance of the MT Education in early childhood development, accounts for the series of International conferences and conventions notable amongst which is the 1990 convention to the Right of the Child, World conference on Education For All (EFA), in Jomtien in 1990 and EFA Summit in New Delhi in 1993 respectively and OAU International Conference on Assistance to Africa Children. At the various congregations the child became a "Priority". Right of the child to free and compulsory education an obligation of the state was canvassed and especially it provides stimulus for government to take action on the right of the child in connection with the Mother Tongue. Corroborating the above position Osanyin (2002) reported that the convention states specifically that every person shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet the basic learning needs. The needs comprise both essential learning tools such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving and the basic learning content such as knowledge, skills, values and activities required to survive and develop to full capacity. Against this background, UNESCO in 1999 declared February 21-22 of every year as International Mother Tongue Day. The inter relatedness and strong relationship that exist between the two concept that is Early Childhood Education and mother tongue cannot be overemphasize.

The Importance of Mother Tongue in Childhood Education

The importance of mother tongue in childhood education shall be discussed under the following headings:

It Facilitates Learning

The use of mother tongue in the early education of child helps in facilitating learning, it serves as a motivation as the child moves from the known, which is the mother tongue to the unknown which is the second language or target language. First language taught should be what children are familiar with. "Tribal children who are not taught in their own dialect or mother tongue in the initial years find learning difficult." He also noted that the children are unable to fully understand classroom teaching and textbooks properly as the language seems to be strange to them.

It Breeds Confidence and Better Academic Performance

Children are able to express themselves and understand concepts and subject matter taught in mother tongue. A study was carried out on fifteen Italian interpreters who were working for the European Union (EU), the interpreters were also all extremely fluent in English language. The study revealed that there were differences in brain activity when the subjects (interpreters) were shown words in their native language versus other languages they were competent in, about 170 milliseconds after a word is shown, the researcher recorded a peak in electrical activity in the left side of the brain area where words are recognized and these brain waves had a much higher amplitude when the words were in Italian, their mother tongue other than other language they were exposed to. Lartec and Anastacia (2014, p.183) buttress this point by saying that "A language of the home in which is transmitted and the foundations to the characteristic parental and filial ties are laid makes children to be more proficient and produces high degree of skills and command."

It Preserves the Learners Identity and Culture

Instruction in mother tongue also preserves the child's identity and culture. Thus Wa-Mbaleka (2014) asked "can one identify with his culture without speaking the mother tongue".

This goes on to show that mother tongue connects the child with the culture of the society that he comes from and shapes his identity. Nelson Mandela also supported this view when he said "If you talk to a man in the language he understands, it goes to his head, but if you talk to him in his mother tongue that goes to his heart". This portrays that mother tongue hold close ties to learner identity and culture, hence denying the child of his mother tongue would tantamount to denying him his culture.

Mother Tongue Provides the Premise for Learning Other Languages

Mother tongue helps the child to acquire and converse in languages other than his mother tongue. Here, the child gets acquainted with the nuances of his mother tongue and on that foundation; he uses them to learn other languages especially when the mother tongue and the target language share a similar structure. It also helps the child to develop stronger literacy skills and children come to school well prepared to learn the language of their immigrant country and make progress educationally.

Mother Tongue as a Medium of Instruction

While there are many factors involved in delivering quality basic education, language is clearly the key to communication and understanding in the classroom. Many developing countries are characterized by individual as well as society multilingualism, yet continue to allow a single foreign language to dominate the education sector. Instruction through a language that learners do not speak has been called "submersion" (Skutnub-Kangas 2000) because it is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim. Compounded by chronic difficulties such as low level of teacher education, poorly designed inappropriate curriculum and lack of adequate facilities, submersion makes both learning and teaching extremely difficult, particularly when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher.

Mother tongue based bilingual programs use the learners' first language known as L1 to teach beginning reading and writing skills along with academic content. The second or foreign language, known as the L2, should be taught systematically so that learners can gradually transfer skills from the familiar language (L1) to unfamiliar one (L2). Bilingual models and practices vary as well as their results, but what they have in common is their use of the mother tongue, at least in the early years so that children can acquire and develop literacy skills in addition to understanding and participating in the classroom. Bilingualism as opposed to monolingual schooling offers significant pedagogical advantages which have been reported consistently in the academic literature (Baker 2001 and UNESCO 2007). Some of these advantages are that to teach beginners literacy facilitates an understanding of sound symbols or meaning symbols correspondence. Learning to read is most efficient when children know the language and can employ psychological guessing strategies; learning of new concepts is easier using LI. There is transfer of linguistic and cognitive skills from LI to L2 e.g. reading and writing that is efficiently transferring the literacy skills they have acquired in the familiar language to unfamiliar one.

The Use of Mother Tongue Based Education

The UN has come out in support of mother-tongue based instruction, because their own objective is to heighten the quality of education, with the belief that there is a need to identify and appreciate linguistic minorities through the continuous use of local dialects in the

academe. By starting with the language that young learners speak at home, the gap in understanding can be bridged better and easier. Hence, elementary students can better absorb lessons (Garbes, 2012)

Current series of linguistic research have much revelation on language and literacy. Some researchers conclude that becoming fluent in one's first language is important for overall language and cognitive development, as well as academic achievement evidence from Cameroon, India, Mali, the Philippines, South Africa, Vietnam, and elsewhere attests to the benefits of learning in a familiar language. First, children learn to read faster if they speak the language of instruction, because they already have the cognitive basin of vocabulary, knowledge of the construction of the utterances, and the ability to enunciate the sounds of the language (Ball, 2010).

Amidst the controversy of the use of mother tongue along instruction, language and dialect variation among multidialectal learners and the teachers' dispositions toward this linguistic issue become the core of debates among the educators. In order to deal with the linguistic demands of the curriculum, the Nigeria teachers should possess the disposition of being a polyglot. This matter point out to the burden of educating the heterogeneous learners considering their dialect variations with different cultural background. According to Yap (2010) the mother tongues in the different regions play an important role in the Nigeria educational system. The Nigerians, being bilingual in nature have strong ethnic loyalty and honor in using their own native tongues in some occasions. In relation to globalization, the use of mother tongue and the priority in the use of international language sometimes become an interesting topic among the linguists. Martin (2006) mentioned that language preferences of teachers and students are often identified as the reasons behind the continuing deterioration of English language proficiency among Nigerians students. Amidst the philosophical battle between English as the second language of Nigeria and English as the national language, some educators consider bilingualism in its pedagogical pedestal. It is generally accepted that teachers of English play a leading role in providing learners with the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to read, write, speak and listen effectively (Arkoudis, 2003). However, Goodwyn, (2003) point out that all teachers have stakes in effective literacy. Learners may fail to understand academic concepts through the language they are still learning because their subject content teachers are not skillful of assisting them (Crandall, 1998).

Conclusion

Parents find much difficulty in using local language as their mother tongue especially when living away from homeland. It is due to the fact that at school the children learn the local language existed in their current circumstance that is not theirs, in the other words they have to master other people's local language. In addition, learning own local language as mother tongue will be more challenging for a young child if there is no support from family and surroundings. Local language is appropriate to be used as mother tongue since they contain elements of emotional, cultural, spiritual, and custom specialty of a society. So, not only as a means to communicate, the mother tongue forms the speakers as well. Neighbourhood, school, and parents are three important foundations to shape young children. Therefore, the use of local language as mother tongue will be strongly influenced by the language used by the parents at home, the language the children obtained from the environment, and the role

of school in accommodating differences of the children's ethnic and cultural background of the children's ethnic and cultural background (Pai, 2005).

In view of the above, it is pertinent for the government, organization, teachers and other stake holders in the educational sector to renew their commitment to the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in early childhood education. Negligence in this regard according to Walter and Dekker (2011, p. 21) might result in the following:

- a) it creates difficulty in the learning process as the children hardly learn effectively until there is some degree of mastery in the language of instruction;
- b) it robs the child of his personal identity and social status. The imposition of a new language on a young learner not only denationalizes and disorganizes him but also debases his personality;
- c) it does not create an atmosphere of continuity between the home and the school for the child as the child is exposed to a different language immediately he gets to school;
- d) it neglects the basic rudiments of the child's cultural heritage which language in essence is the vehicle of transmission.

Suggestions

- a) The policy position on use of mother tongue as medium of instruction for early childhood education should be promoted in the school system taking a cue from the six years life project which is acknowledge to be highly successful and effective in helping children to become bi-literate in their mother tongue and English language.
- b) The school administrators and class managers should motivate the child to acquire and develop full language skills such as understanding, speaking, reading and writing not only in English Language but also in their mother tongue because this has potential to assist the child to communicate effectively and also understand clearly the language of his immediate environment.
- c) Recognizing the significance of the mother tongue in helping the child to develop the right attitude to language acquisition, literacy skills and cultural values by Parents would reduce the emphasis on speaking English language a must for their young ones. Thus, the beauty of the mother tongue to early childhood education should be emphasized at every opportunity not only by those in the education enterprise but by all agencies of government concerned with mobilization like the Mass Mobilization agency and all other advocate groups.
- d) More teachers should be trained in the indigenous language especially in the universities and Colleges of Education if meaningful development and use of mother tongue in early childhood education is to be achieved.
- e) Financial incentives as well as good welfare package should be made available by the government to indigenous language teachers for them to be more committed to the job.
- f) Government should motivate language teachers to be committed so as to enhance proper implementation of the mother tongue policy especially in a multilingual society like Nigeria.
- g) Nigerians, especially children should be encouraged to speak their mother tongue in their homes and in the school. Our indigenous languages should cease to be called 'vernacular'.

- h) Instructional materials for teaching all languages such as bilingual dictionary, tape recorded, text etc. should be made available for teachers in primary schools.
- i) Government should ensure that conventional universities are involved in the training of first language teachers for the three major indigenous languages so as to have enough hands to handle mother tongue usage as a medium of instruction.
- j) Teachers need to be taught the method of teaching children in the language they understand. This will enable children do less of rote learning, repetition and copying. Children will move from rote learning to interactive learning with more of peer-to-peer relationship, think critically and creatively, read and come to their own conclusion without teachers' interference.

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