

THE CONTROVERSY OVER USE OF MOTHER TONGUE AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION AND CASE IN FAVOUR OF SECONDARY EDUCATION



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Abstract

The use of language in education has been found to have crucial social and technical dimensions. In particular, use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in Nigeria has been supported by a wide range of materials contributed by government, experts and the public. This has also been accompanied by long raging competition and controversy. The facts and fictions of the matter as they relate specially to secondary education are X-rayed here. Finally, the major problems are isolated and accompanied with recommendations of the ways out in order to make for a high quality educational system.

Language is very important in the education, development and life of the human being. It contains, conveys and catalyzes human experiences, conditions and aspirations. Hence, highly respected educational psychologists, theorists and researchers namely Piaget, Vygostsky and Bruner were reported by Unoh (1982:1) as being united and consistent in making the point that the achievement of key aspects of human development depend on the mastery of language.

Consequently, there have been several governmental policies and provisions as well as individuals who proffered principles and practices globally and in Nigeria to conform with the accepted importance of language in education. These efforts include the provisions in the National Policy on Education (FRN 1977, 2004) and the. Ife Six Years Primary School Yoruba Project by Prof. Fatunwa (1976). Both of these and many other authorities recognized the mother tongue as medium of instruction.

However, provisions and efforts on the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in Nigeria have been mainly on the lower primary school and programs below it. The secondary education level and above have been left out of the policy and implementation activities.

This paper examines relevant aspects of the controversy over use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in Nigeria. It presents major forms of the provision of the policy and patterns, including results of the major efforts in implementation of the policy. And it analyzes the conditions created by its non-extension to the secondary education level and how this affects life-after-school of the citizens and society. There are recommendations and conclusions given at the end for correcting situation of the nation.

Nature of the Mother Tongue

Mother tongue means the language used dominantly in the immediate environment of the child, from about the time of his birth to about the age of five years, including by his parents, guardians, peers and others who are consistently closest to the child during this period. It is also variously called language of immediate community, language of immediate environment, first language, et cetera. It is easily separated from any other language taught to the child along-side it, which is used for or by the child occasionally or from a little later in life.

The formative and decisive functions of language are primarily and most adequately performed through the mother tongue from early in, and throughout the life of a person and a people. The dominant first language of a community is the repository of the culture of the people. Mother tongue bears in its belly and mouth the persons/peoples most original descriptions, quantifications, perceptions, valuations and expressions of all aspects of their life. A people's consumptive capabilities and creative geniuses are all most correctly carried and conveyed or transmitted by their own language for themselves and for the younger ones to generations yet to born.

It is a natural consequence of the nature, and it has been asserted that the major reason countries like Russia, China, America, Britain and France developed fast into scientific and social super-powers is because they have never been seriously culturally colonized. Also all these countries started early in their existence to use their indigenous languages in all their educational, scientific, social and economic activities.

Colonized societies over the ages in history have worked to throw off the culturally crippling grips of foreign tongues. These have never yielded desired results without being accompanied by serious oppositions, fights and pains. The rewards of success in this area are enormous as seen in Spain with victory of Spanish over English, Britain with victory if English over Latin and French, and Tanzania with victory of Swahili over French and German.

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Based principally on the use of their mother tongues in their writings the world has already acclaimed the high quality of the works of Okot p'Bitek in Acholi language (Uganda), Duro Ladipo in Yoruba language (Nigeria) and the later Ngugi Wa Thiongo in Gikuyu language (Kenya). These are said to be superior to their counter – part African writers who use foreign European languages.

The National Language Policy

The official provisions and approvals that the mother tongue shall be used as medium of instruction in Nigeria are contained mainly in the National Policy on Education from its first edition (FRN 1977) to the current fourth edition (FRN 2004). There are also restatements of the policy and especially directives for use of it in government activities found in other educational directives on documents, institutional laws and briefs of National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), et cetera. Individual scholars have also produced researched works and professional support works on this as seen in Bangbose (1989).

For pre-primary education, the National Policy on Education (FRN 2004:12) provides that government shall

- a. Ensure that the medium of instruction is principally mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and to this end will.
 - i. Develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages, and
 - ii. Produce textbooks in Nigerian languages;

For primary education, the government further provides in the policy (FRN 2004:16) that

- A) 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, and
- B) From the fourth year, English shall be progressively used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects.

In the junior secondary schools NPE (FRN 2004:19) provides only a footnote or passing hint that “the language of environment should be taught as L1 where it has orthography and literature. Where it does not have, it shall be taught with emphasis on oracy as L2. And the policy provides for senior secondary schools that the mother tongue in the form of any one Nigerian Language shall be taught as a core compulsory subject, while another one may also be studied and offered in certificate examination as an elective

Form of the Controversy

It is significant to note that controversy has attended the enunciation of the policy and even the proffering of research results and experts' positions for the use and development of mother tongue as medium of instruction. The controversy hinges on, among others, three principal points. These are the incomplete policy provisions, the poor implementation practices and impracticable principles. The controversy comes from the various sections of qualified stakeholders in the society, including teachers, researchers, textbook writers, policy makers, media commentators and general public. More importantly, the controversy hinges on various critical aspects of the theory and practice, and it has negatively affected aspects, of the use and development of the indigenous languages.

Many regard the Nigerian national language policy as incomplete because it does not provide for all aspects of language study, use and development. In specific terms it is observed that the policy and practice do not in any way cover the vital areas of the mother tongue issue, including the following:

- i. Mother tongue as medium of instruction as it affects all educational areas.
- ii. Mother tongue as subject of study at all levels.
- iii. Mother tongue linguistics development.
- iv. Mother tongue for official and general communications.
- v. Mother tongue for cultural presentations (in literature, music, history), etc.

Another aspect of its incompleteness over which strong objections are raised is that the policy, the National Policy on Education (FRN 2004) for instance, does not provide for use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in the Secondary School (junior and senior levels) and tertiary institutions (Olagoke 1979) even if optionally. There are also no statutory provisions anywhere of sanctions that should be given against individuals, institutions and groups who contravened the spirit and/or letter of the language policy.

It has also been observed that there is poor implementation (if any) strategies for the language policy. Umo (2002) says that "the situation with regard to the use of Mother Tongue in teaching is so pathetic that teachers at the primary school level perceive it as a mere fulfillment of government policy". At the secondary school level and above, students are thus, by extension, permitted not to offer or pass any indigenous language in their class studies and external examinations.

Finally, the principles contained in the government policy and research findings given by some scholars showing the importance or benefits and correct procedures for use and development of the mother tongue in Nigeria are seen by many other language experts as impracticable generally and in our environment in particular. Part of the

reasons for this, they say, is that it is not possible to select any one of the over two hundred and fifty indigenous languages for use as the official mother tongue language of Nigeria and that the current use of three official languages (Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba) or 'trilingualism' in the country is linguistically meaningless. And the position of English as the main or the fourth official language for the country, amidst the whole thing, is regarded as final obstacle to the concept and proper use of mother tongue for national development.

Mother Tongue for Secondary Education

Use of the objectives and adaptation of the contents of mother tongue in primary education is equally necessary and suitable, if not more so, in secondary education in particular and all other higher levels of education. That is to say that secondary education is very important in the foundation and advancement of life for which the local language should be fully used in teaching, learning and general development.

Unoh (1989) emphasizes that use of language that is most familiar to the learner enables him/her to develop strong foundation of cognition of concepts and emotional relationships of experience. This familiar language is the mother tongue given to the learner as tool with which to learn and as subject to study. Fafunwa was cited by Umo (2003) that "local languages are the only way to the promised land, that mother tongue education is an inalienable human right of the individual".

The primary purpose of secondary education curriculum is to extend the experience "of the young persons to stimulate, stabilize and standardize their thinking powers and to elevate their tastes with varied subjects" (Maduekwe 2003). It is no wonder then that, inspite of these laudable objectives and even contents like pre-vocational JSS and vocational SSS subjects, there is mass unemployable secondary school leavers (due to wrong use of language in the system).

No doubt the major hindrance to production of confident, creative and competent graduates from secondary education is the non-use of mother tongue as medium of instruction and as subject for compulsory active study at this level.

Problems

In general, it is observed that the continued use of English language as medium of instruction as well as subject of study at the three levels of the Nigeria educational system and a relatively undue emphasis given to the language in other spheres of the peoples life, according to Umo (2003), is to the detriment of indigenous languages in the country.

In particular, the non-inclusion of the secondary education level for operation of mother tongue as medium of instruction and effective development has generated great concerns and controversy among educationists and other stakeholders. These concerns point out a spate of problems or challenges lined against the policy and practice of no effective use and development of mother tongue in secondary education.

Most of the secondary school teachers are not literate or fluent in their learner's mother tongue, even if the same is the teacher's mother tongue too. And there are many cases where the mother tongue of several individuals and groups in the same class, including the teacher's, differ each one from the others. In such a multilingual class, like the multilingual country Nigeria, use of one mother tongue languages as medium of instruction becomes impossible and there is a resort to English.

Most of the indigenous languages are either not developed in written forms (have no orthography) for effective use in teaching and learning or, in the case of the three major Nigerian languages and very few others so developed, there is lack of trained manpower, even of people to whom the language is mother tongue, to use them in teaching and learning.

It has been observed that inflexibility and resistance to change as well as wrong rating of indigenous language as inferior or of low quality are principal factors of hindrances to effective use of the mother tongue in secondary education in Nigeria. Teachers' incompetence and parents' ignorance are responsible for this. Specialist researchers and textbook writers have failed to give the right pressures for a radical execution of the correct mother tongue development program.

Finally, there is inadequate provision of resources for a full and firm prosecution of the practice of developing and using the mother tongue effectively in the country. Government, in addition to contributing to teachers' resistance and negative attitudes, also lack the necessary complete policies and concrete practices for correct mother tongue development and use in the secondary school.

Conclusion

Language is a big issue in Nigeria because of the multilingual and related conditions of the country. Learning, development and use of indigenous or mother tongue languages as medium of instruction in secondary education has been focused upon here as very important with great benefits to all.

Recommendation

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Based on the observed non-existence of proper development and use of mother tongue in all aspects of teaching and learning in secondary school education, the following recommendations are made to take care of the hindering factors;

1. The government should review the national language policy. The use of mother tongue only should be made compulsory in all official interactions and communications of all aspects of life including education, culture, administration and commerce.
2. Teachers in secondary schools should undergo special courses and continuous training for development and use of mother tongue of their learners in general communication and as medium of instruction. This should be made compulsory requirement for their recruitment and/or retention or progression.
3. Adequate instructional materials that include texts, equipment and facilities should be developed, provided and used specially for effective implementation of the policy of using mother tongue as medium of instruction in secondary education.
4. Incentives should be provided by parents, schools and government for learners to encourage their active learning, development and use of the mother tongue. The incentives should be in the forms of monetary, material and moral items.

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