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## **The Effects of Mother Tongue as a Complementary Medium of Instruction and the Performance of Students in Secondary Schools**

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### **Abstract**

*The Nigerian government recognizes the multilingual nature of Nigeria and shows that it is anxious to tap those resources for national development- Thus, provision is made for their use in the two most important documents that spell out national life, namely; the constitution of the Federal republic of Nigeria and National Policy on Education, These provisions for languages in these documents presuppose that they are in use in homes and in the communities. However, performance of students in English Language Examinations such as Junior School Certificate Examination, West African examination and other national examination is worrisome. In this view, it becomes very imperative to find out whether mother tongue has any relationship with the English Language usage on Language proficiency and academic performances. It is on this plain that this paper looks at the importance of English language in Nigeria, the poor performance of students in English Language exams, attitude towards instruction, communicative competence and the importance of mother tongue as a medium of instruction. It concludes with recommendation on the imperativeness of mother tongue as a complementary medium of instruction.*

The use of mother tongue in the teaching and learning of English has been an issue of debate. Most teachers feel that the use of First Language (L1) should be minimized and they feel guilty if they use it a great deal. When challenged they find it difficult to say why. Against the use of L1 is the general assumption that English should be learnt through English, just as mother tongue is learnt using mother tongue. The idea that the learner should learn English like a native speaker does, or tries to “think in English”, is an inappropriate and unachievable aim. The importance of English Language acquisition as a stepping-stone for proficiency in other school subjects cannot be over emphasized. The knowledge is important both for educational, economical and national development of a country.

The Nigeria government recognizes the multilingual nature of Nigeria and shows that it is anxious to tap that resource for national development. Thus, provision is made for their use in the two most important documents that spell out national life; namely; the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and National Policy on Education. The provisions for language in the two documents presuppose that they are in active use in homes and in communities.

However, performance of students in English Language Examinations, such as Junior Secondary School Certificates Examination (JSSCE), West African Examination Councils (WAEC) and other national examinations are worrisome. In this vein, it becomes very imperative to find out whether mother tongue has any bearing on the English Language usage among English students as a second Language users, English language proficiency and academic achievement of students.

### **The Importance of English Language in Nigeria**

The importance of English language as a school subject derives mainly for its utilitarian value to the larger Nigeria society. English is the official language of administration and commerce. It is a major language of science. Above all, Salami (2002) had emphasized the importance of English language in improving communication among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. He further highlighted the need for improving the quality of spoken and written English Language among school children. However, one of the current educational problems of public interest is that of poor level of achievement especially in public examinations (Kolawole 1998 and Dele 2002).

In recognition of the importance of English Language for enhancing educational attainment as well as for improving communication ability of citizens, the government had made the subject a core subject (FGN 2004). It is also compulsory for students to have credit in English Language before entering the university. This also

explains why many parents go off their way to see that their children pass at credit level and above in English Language.

### **The Poor Performance of Students in English Language Examinations and Other Subjects**

The problems of under-achievement among school children have persisted in many subject areas such as Mathematics, English and Science (Akpan, Ivowi, Okebukola and Aladotun 1992; Falayajo 1997). This poor level of achievement in many subject areas may be due to poor foundation in English Language at the primary school level. There are also several research reports which support the view that language inefficiency invariably leads to poor academic performance. (Oluikpe, 1979; Ayooele 1988; Falayajo, 1997; Onukaogu 20002).

Okoro (2002) stated that the problem of poor level of achievement of primary school children was a serious one in Nigeria and this was inspite of the fact that Nigeria had set up goals for increasing minimum level of learning by 1995. The author had observed that ample evidence of poor performance was still observed as the pupils move up the system. Attempt was therefore made to find out the extent to which Okoro's (2000) observation applies to primary school pupils in English Language beyond the year 2000. Perhaps, the way English language is taught in schools and colleges may be blamed for some of the observed lapses in English Language achievement of learners. Ubakakwe (1991), Ohia (1997) and Duff (1997) had criticized the traditional teaching strategy in use for English Classrooms. Kolawole (1991, 1998) had blamed the use of the traditional teaching strategy for lack of good grasp of basic skills in writing. William (1990) had described this teaching strategy as a hit and miss affair. Oglan (1997) had criticized the domineering nature of traditional teaching strategy which renders learners passive in class. He therefore, recommended an activity classroom where learners especially at the primary school level can make learning a fun. Such learning activities may include films etc. Kolawole (2002) also confirmed that the performance of the primary school pupils in English language was very poor. They stressed further that the standard was poor due to a number of other reasons such as:-

1. The use of tribal language in the lower classes of the primary school.
2. Some pupils do not understand the grammar because their teachers themselves do not know it, and in most cases, English Language teachers in the senior primary classes resort to the use of mother tongue to teach and explain the English language even up to the secondary school level.

## **Communicative Competence in the use of English Language as a Second Language (L2)**

Several scholars have addressed the core problems of communicative competence in the use of English Language as a second language (L2) and its use as the main education delivery process. It is unfortunate that most school learners (apart from the products of elite private schools) do not possess the required competence in the four language skills for both cognitive and communicative functions. Statistics released by the West African Examination Council, which conducts the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination show that less than ten percent of secondary school leavers pass in English at credit level. At the tertiary level of education, students have so much difficulty with their communicative skills in English that they cannot function effectively in the academic use of English (Okoro, 2000). There is no doubt that there is a great diversity and functions of English in Nigeria in all spheres of endeavours.

This justifies the entrenchment of English as the dominant official Language of Nigeria. The nagging problem however, concerns the quality of English that is taught and used in the school setting. The concern being expressed in informed educational circles is about the extent to which the variety and quality of English being learned and used in the school system can serve in achieving Nigeria's educational goals and objectives.

The mother tongue is the child's immediate Language of expression and is the natural basics on which verbal skills can be built. Children learn through communicating in a language which they understand. It was in recognition of the importance and contributions of mother tongue to education that the Federal Ministry of Education in collaboration with other educational statutory agencies include in the National Policy on Education published in 1977, 1981, and revised in 1991, the use of mother tongue as a medium of educating pupils at the pre-primary and primary level throughout the country.

### **Mother Tongue and the National Policy on Education**

According to the National Policy on Education published in 1977, 1981, and revised in 1991 section 2(ii) "Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community" also in section 3(xx) of the same document, it is stated that: "Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue of the immediate community and at a later stage, English".

The importance of Nigerian language in the educational process is stated in section 1 thus, "In addition to appreciating the importance of language in educational process and as means of preserving people's culture, they consider it in the best interest

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of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his mother tongue.

The mother tongue therefore, is a part of the Nigerian culture; it conveys or transmits culture to people through culturally conditioned attitudes and beliefs (Awoniyi, 1975). The positive results of the experiment in mother tongue medium in Yoruba carried out at the University of Ife by Babatunde Fafunwa empirically demonstrated the great advantages of scholastic attainment (Bamgbose, 1984) and even in the successful mastery of English as a second language. At this juncture, it is very imperative to look at whether mother tongue has any relationship with the English Language usage and the performance of secondary school students.

### **Attitude towards Instruction in the Mother Tongue**

The success of mother tongue instruction policy depends on people's attitudes towards the first language (L1) and English L2. And to understand how attitudes towards a language develop, it is necessary to consider the social and political history of a nation, since such historical force play significant role in language usage (Bamgbose, 1991; Robinson 1996). Thus, the colonial and the post colonial Language and educational policies obviously provide a solid basis for the explanation of attitude towards African Language and English L2 (Ngugi Wa Thiougo; 1986, Bamgbose, 1991) Roy Campbell, 1996).

The colonial language policies either adopted the use of English from the first grade or only used native languages as a medium of instruction in the lower classes of the primary school. Post colonial language policies have maintained the *status quo*, thus perpetuating the existence of an elite group which is characterized by relatively high economic status, high educational level and high competence in English (Robinson, 1996, Granville, Janks, Joseph 1988).

Therefore, African nations remain "prisoners of the past" since they are so overwhelmed by established practices to such an extent that it is virtually impossible to break away from them (Bamgbose, 1991), hence, the colonial and neo-colonial subjects tend to undermine their own language, as observed by Adegbija (1994:33) thus:

*This attitude of denigration towards ones own language and exaltation of European languages has not been easy to remove in Africa. Its scars are still very visible today, particularly in the education system. Thus, the fact that indigenous languages are not used for education beyond the lower grades has greatly contributed towards African indigenous languages being regarded as less important.*

## **Mother Tongue Teaching/Learning of English and Teachers Performance in Schools**

In a study on “Measuring and targeting internal conditions for schools effectiveness in South Africa” Abraham and Keith (2006), used a questionnaire as the basis for constructing an index of school effectiveness. Their findings revealed that teachers were the key driver of internal school conditions for effectiveness, development and school change. Oshodi (1991) investigated resource utilization and students academic performance in Kwara state secondary schools using a questionnaire. Spearman rank correlation co-efficient was used to determine the most influential factors on students academic performance. He also found that the quality of teachers was the most important determinant of student performance in secondary schools.

Further to these, Ibitoye (2003) discovered that there is a significant relationship between enrolments, utilization of classrooms provided for teachers, the teaching of learning activities and students’ academic performance. In the same way, Akpofure and Ndipu (2002), reported the need for schools to maintain a manageable carrying capacity in utilization of classrooms, libraries and laboratories for effective teaching and learning. To them, this will pave the way for quality assurance in schools. A similar study by Aduwa (2004), on determinants of students’ academic success, reported that a student’s home environment, their cognitive abilities, self esteem, self concept, study habits, motivation and mother tongue affect their academic performance in schools.

Also Ehrenberg and Brewer (1995), Ferguson (1991) asserted that students learn more from teachers with strong academic skills. According to these researchers, teachers’ assignments depend on their qualification of the subjects taught.

Middle and high school students learn more from teachers who hold Bachelors or masters degrees in English Language and other subjects they teach and also from experienced teachers than they for from less experienced ones (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

### **The Importance of the Use of Mother Tongue as a Medium of Instruction**

The use of mother tongue when teaching and learning English has been an issue of debate. Most teachers feel that the use of L1 should be minimized, and they feel guilty if they use it a lot but when challenged they find it difficult to say why.

The UNESCO committee of 1953 states that, the best medium for teaching children is the mother tongue through which children learn better and express themselves freely. The basic position of the 1953 report, which shows that children learn quickly through their first language than an unfamiliar linguistic medium is

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supported by research evidence from other African nations (Nwamwenda, 1996). Out of many research findings; Bamgbose (1991) cited the Six Year Primary Project started in 1970 in Nigeria to establish the effectiveness of the first Language as compared with English (L2). Results of the experiment clearly showed that, the indigenous Language facilitated more meaningful learning than English. In another research, Cleghorn (1992) also carry out comparative studies on the effectiveness of the L1 over English L2 in several schools in Kenya and he also found that important idea were more easily conveyed when teachers did not stick to the requirements of the English as the only language of instruction.

Whereas those who learn through their L1 are not at an advantage, learners who learn through a second language are disadvantaged (Wallwork 1985), (Ngara 1982) asserts that in a learning situation where only the L2 is used as a medium of instruction, learners face problems because their task is twofold. The first is that the student has to make sense of the instructional tasks which are presented in the second Language. Secondly, the learner has to attain linguistic competence which is required for effective learning to take place.

### **Conclusion**

If permanent literacy is to be achieved in the primary and secondary schools, the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction ought to be encouraged. Although English language retains its dominant role in the educational delivery system in Nigeria, the thrust of Nigerian educational language policy is the use of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community in pre-primary and primary education exclusively as the medium of English language.

### **Recommendation/Suggestions**

From the study, the following recommendations and suggestions were made:

- 1) It is recommended that there should be a review in the Language Policy on education. The review should contain recommendations that will make pupils to have exposure to English language early from the primary school irrespective of the advantages of mother tongue. It is suggested that the teaching of English should be more practical.
- 2) The mother tongue is the language of the child's environment and it is the natural basis on which verbal skills can be built, children learn through communicating in a language which they understand. It is in recognition of the importance and contribution of mother tongue to education that made the federal government included it in the National Policy on Education, the use of mother tongue as a medium of teaching pupils at the pre-primary and primary levels of education.

- 3) As Akinbote and Ogunsanwo (2003) observed, the use of mother tongue in the process of teaching and learning in the early years helps not only to preserve the values of culture but also to develop it lexically.
- 4) It is further suggested that the use of mother tongue should be made compulsory so as to enable the children to have a mental translation of all concepts presented in English and also to gain sufficient meaning of the concepts.
- 5) Finally, it is believed that a citizen that is literate even only in the mother tongue will be sufficiently equipped to live a useful and meaningful life in the fast changing world.

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