

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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### Abstract

Early Childhood Education is very essential in a child's life hence the recent focus on it across the globe. It is that education that provides for children whose age bracket is from 0 to 8 years. To demonstrate the significance of Mother Tongue education in Early childhood development, February 21-22 of every year is set aside as the International Mother Tongue Day globally. The declaration by UNESCO in 1999 further emphasized the relationship between the two concepts. This paper examines the contributions of Mother Tongue Education in Early Childhood. Issues raised will be discussed under the following six subdivisions: background of language situation in Nigeria; policy document on language in Nigeria; language theories and development; problem statement and rationale; success and failures of MT in countries and suggestions on the way forward.

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**Keywords:** Early education, Mother tongue

### Introduction

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 (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 can not be overemphasize.

### **Historic Review of the Position of Language in Nigeria**

In a multilingual and multiethnic environment like Nigeria, a large number of indigenous languages exist and the number has been put differently, Hansford (1976) mentions 395; Banjo (1975) in Ayilara and Oyedeki (2000) says 500 and Bamgbose (1992) maintains that it is 513 (Makinde 2007). Despite this large number, English therefore, remain the official national language and as a result the generality of the population is inclined towards oral use of English Language. Practically in the schools system English has become the pre-eminent language of education right from the colonial time to the present as it is both the medium of instruction right from nursery one and through out school life. A view shared by Oderinde (2007) who expressed that English Language rode on the back of British colonialism into Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Exclusively 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. Oderinde (2007) maintain that English assumed this new status through the instrumentality of aggressive governmental machinery and support aided by culpable acquiescence of indigenous population- both the locals who perceived the use of English tongue as symbols and the overseas returnees (the educated reprieved slaves) who flaunted their novel Language acquisition to the blind admiration of the locals, who often times aped them in their speech. The aping and the idea of looking at English expression as class have led to about 80% (if not higher percentage) of the Nigerian elite in the Southern 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 can not read or write in their native language or Modern Tongue.

Fafunwa, (1978) however established through research that the best language for good concept formation at a very tender age is the indigenous language. The research was conducted in 1970, at the Institute of Education of the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife) in Osun State of Nigeria. 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.

Generally, Ejieh, (2004) stressed that the goal of the Ife project was to develop a sound primary education for the child and make him to be cognitively alert as a citizen of his country and the steps taken to achieve this objective included the designing of relevant primary school curriculum with appropriate teaching materials and using Yoruba as the medium of instruction throughout the six years of primary school while English was taught as a separate subject. According to Fafunwa, (1986) Primary school teachers were specially trained in the use of mother tongue for instruction. There were regular intakes of primary one class in some selected primary schools, while some are regarded as experimental groups

others are control groups. The data collection and analysis was done between 1971 and 1983 and it revealed that the experimental group of schools performed better than the controlled group in all school subjects at the end of primary school education. The result attracted much publicity in Nigeria especially in both the print and electronic media and it was suggested that the language of the immediate environment that is Yoruba (home language) be adopted as the medium of instruction throughout the six-year period of primary education.

### **Policy Document on Language in Nigeria**

The language-spread policies in Nigeria are evidently displayed in the educational domain. Hence, the National Policy on Education (NPE), submits is essentially an articulation, by government, of the way education system should be organized in order to achieve national goals and objectives. In the case of Early Childhood Education, the National Policy on Education (NPE 2004), section 1 (10) (a) 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.

The provision for language teaching and learning in the National Policy on Education (NPE 2004) as stated above is no doubt laudable, but effectively achieving the set goals and objectives in the areas of implementing this creditable policy in the classroom is in doubt. In practice Maduewesi (1999) held that for two reasons 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 loose patronage. Secondly, it seems both unrealistic and unfair to expect this policy to be taken seriously as long as the National language, the language of business and transaction remain English language.

Oderinde (2007) strongly acceded to the ideas expressed above by Maduewesi, and warned that as a nation, we have found ourselves in this quandary because of the status of English as second language (SL) and because we want to savour the best status for ourselves and our children we end up shooting ourselves in the foot by unwittingly foisting on ourselves cultural alienation.

### **Theories about Language Development**

The earliest theory about language development assumed that children acquire language through imitation. Explaining the process of learning the Mother Tongue effectively in the early stage of schooling, Nwakwe (2006) noted that the process of learning the Mother Tongue is such that the child's build up sounds of words in sub-conscious cumulatively until such a time that the speech organs are ready to utilize these internalized sounds. The rules governing language at this stage is that language are acquired without any careful study but by imitating words and expressions as they are used in the child's immediate environment by the father, mother, brother, sister and nannies who are the first people the child made contact with. However, research has shown that children who imitate the actions of those around them during their first year of life are generally those who also learn to talk more quickly, there is also evidence that imitation alone cannot explain how children become talkers (David, T. Gouch, K. Powell, S. Abbott, L, 2003)

According to the Behaviourist theorist, lead by Skinner, children learn language through reinforcement. In other words, when a parent shows enthusiasm for something a child tries to say, this should encourage the child to repeat the utterance. But again, even though reinforcement may help, this theory cannot account for children's inventions of language.

Some argue that it is not just hearing language around them that is important, it is the kind of language – whether it is used responsively (for example, following a baby's input, such as the baby making a noise or doing something). It is also clear that babies need to hear language to develop this themselves. The idea of *motherese* (Snow and Ferguson 1977; Trevarthen 1995) –accentuated, tuneful, accentuated speech to babies and repeating their own language (often extended) back to young children – was posited as a basic human requirement. However, other research (Snow and Ferguson 1977) indicates that while motherese can be used to explain how aspects of individual children's environments help or hinder them from talking, it does not explain the underlying causes of language acquisition. We can at least suggest that talking in motherese attracts and holds babies' attention and that it allows the infants themselves to take part in enjoyable turn taking exchanges, the beginnings of conversations.

Chomsky (1965; 1975) proposed that babies are born with an inbuilt *Language Acquisition Device* (LAD). He suggested that language then simply emerges as the child matures. Slobin (Ferguson and Slobin 1973; Slobin 1985) continued this line of thought, proposing that just as newborns come into the world 'programmed' to look at interesting, especially moving, objects, so babies are pre-programmed to pay attention to language. One problem with this theory is that children seem to have great proficiency in acquiring whatever language/s they hear around them and during their first year of life they will gradually discard from their repertoire of vocalisations sounds which they do not hear in the speech of those with whom they spend their lives – but of course the pre-programming does not need to be thought of as tied to a specific language. Like Trevarthen and others, Chomsky indicates the centrality of interactions with familiar adults and older children from the earliest days of life.

Piaget argued that language is an example of symbolic behaviour, and no different from other learning. Conclusively, it can be argued that none of these theories about language can stand on its own and there is the need to take account of each of them for their ability to explain part of the story.

### **Problem Statement and Rationale**

Over the years, there may not have been satisfactory growth in the number of pre-schools that have adopted the mother tongue as medium of instruction despite its desirability and the pronouncement of the National Policy on Education's (NPE 2004). Instead school administrators and teachers made pupils pay a fine or serve punishment each time they were found in the classroom speaking any indigenous languages which are referers to as vernacular. However Ogbona (2006) warned that effective learning in schools is rooted in literacy in the languages used for learning. The resultant effect on the children is total disregard and loss of interest in the indigenous languages taught within the school system.

Any education system relies on a network of interactions between and among parents, teachers, students and community members. These interactions are influenced by many factors amongst which is the socio, and cultural drivers like the 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 using the mother tongue. A position corroborated by Oderinde (2007) that the cultural alienation and resultant changes that go with English

Language and western education in Nigeria are the root of our preference for foreign things dress, music and lifestyle.

The current trend in many homes particularly in the urban centres is that many parents communicate with their children in English rather than the mother tongues thus neglecting the native language. 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. Maduwesi (1999) condemned this practice and reprimand that children are maimed emotionally and intellectually when they are taught so early in a language with which they are not familiar with.

### **Success and Failures of Mother Tongue in Countries**

In 2001, the government in Denmark amended the law on school instruction in the home language. The amendment abolished government subsidy for the instruction in the home language except for children of parents from European Union countries (www.google.com 2009). From 1975 and until the change in legislation in 2002, instruction in the home language had been offered on equal terms irrespective of country of origin to all children for 3-5 hours a week. This amendment led to heavy deterioration in the conditions for obtaining home language instruction for the largest group of children from the third world countries in Denmark. As a result of the change in legislation in 2008, about 62,000 of these children from the third world countries have lost their rights which they previously had, to develop their home language as an integral part of the public educational system (www.google.com 2009).

The Molteno Project (Duncan 1995) another programme for teaching initial literacy using the home language, was examined in the Pan-African Conference papers (Tambulukani et al., 1999). The project examines the use of IChibemba as a language of instruction in 25 primary schools in the Northern Province of Zambia. Due to the huge success of this project, Zambia has put into place a primary reading programme based on this model that will be used in its primary schools for the next few years. The implication of this is that, this project seeks to build English skills in a way that will make English more effective in Zambian schools and society, while recognising that Zambian home languages are the foundation upon which a durable literacy programme can be built.

Williams and Mchazime's (1999) examines the success of Malawi's early literacy instruction using the home language as a medium of instruction while acknowledging the need for English as a language of literacy in the region. This study investigates reading proficiency in English and ChiChewa, the home language in primary schools. The study argues that reading, listening comprehension and speaking in the home language were much easier for students who participated in the study than were the same activities when conducted in English.

### **Suggestions**

- 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 Ife project which is acknowledge to be highly successful and effective in helping children to become bi-literate in their mother tongue and English language.
- 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.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

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