



## THE ROLE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE IN THE TEACHING LEARNING PROCESS: EMERGING CONCERNS

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### **Abstract**

*Mother-tongue is very useful in the educational process in a multilingual society. Since the educational process builds upon the entering behaviour of a learner at any level into the classroom, the use of mother-tongue as the initial medium of instruction in pre-primary and primary schooling can never be overemphasized especially in a multilingual society where mother-tongue is one of the numerous experiences which children bring to the classroom. Owing to the efficacy of mother tongue for child's academic growth and national development, the use of mother tongue and its implementation in our schools has to be given serious attention. Nowadays, the use of mother tongue in child upbringing particularly by enlightened parents and other relevant persons is found to be on a very serious decline. This may be as a result of ignorance of the academic benefit of this medium of communication. It is against this backdrop, that this study investigated the role of the mother tongue in the teaching learning process: emerging concerns. Consequently, the meaning of mother tongue was discussed and the various ways through which mother tongue can promote academic achievement of children were also highlighted. The problems facing the child's chances to speak his mother tongue were further discussed. Also, practical tips and strategies for revitalizing indigenous languages that are endangered and practical ways of encouraging the use of mother tongue were highlighted as well. The paper concluded by advising the policy makers that those countries of the world who have made it recorded their success on the basis of development and utilization of their indigenous languages and Nigeria will thrive in science, technology, education and economy if ideas are created in their native language. Lastly the paper, recommended that parents and all those people concerned with child upbringing not to deny children the right or opportunity to speak their mother tongue and government should formulate good language policies to promote the indigenous language and ensure that all the language policies formulated are fully implemented.*

**Key words:** Language, mother tongue, teaching and learning

## Introduction

Communication cannot be excluded from human existence as man has to communicate with one another right from the beginning, using various media. The issue of language needed to be taken very seriously because man must continuously communicate to live and also carry out his daily activities with his neighbours. According to Opeifa, Adelana and Atolagbe (2022), the existence of man and his development depend on language for communication. The authors continued that over the years, language has remained and will remain a very vital tool through which humans communicate with one another. This is because; language serves as a means of socialization. Similarly, Wang and Tsai (2021) stated that one of the major features of man is his ability to communicate information relating to his activities to others and this is done through either written or spoken language. In a similar vein, Ezenwosu, Anyanwu, Metu, Ezeugo and Eleje (2022) postulated that language is a means of social control and is the initial factor that differentiates human beings from other creatures

The authors continued that language is a means of capacity building in individuals, particularly learners. Dzer (2019) also concurred that language has ever been fundamental to the development and progress of individuals and nations in all fields of work and study.

Since the beginning of mankind, language has remained a veritable tool for the upbringing of the individual. The education of the child starts from the home. Nwali (2014) shared this view when he remarked that the home is one of the agencies of education and the first station through which the child enters the world. It is pertinent to note that for the home to play its role of educating the child successfully, language must be employed by all those concerned in his education. This is why Nwali (2014) argued that learning cannot take place without a person, interaction, environment and behaviour change. In the context of this study, language is used to refer to mother tongue since both of them play relatively the same roles. Throughout the earlier stage of the child's growth and development, he maintains closer contact with his parents (starting with his mother) and other close relatives. Those sets of persons interact with him and teach him the do's and don'ts

of their society and other things that will adequately prepare him for useful adult life using his mother tongue. It is on this premise that Onyeka, Nwamaradi and Chimuanya (2023) are of the view that effective communication channel between parents and children help to establish harmonious relationship between them. According to the authors, traditional education in all its ramifications starts from infancy with basic instruction given in the mother tongue through which the child is made to live a full life that enables him to participate from the very beginning. Based on the views of these scholars, it may be relevant to assert that the home is the preparatory place for the child's formal education. For this reason, it could be seen that the home cannot function effectively in the training of the child without the use of mother tongue.

The term 'language' could be applied to man's ability at exercising his innate vocal endowment. It could also be seen as a means of expression available to a given speech community for the purposes of communication and socialization as well as that of projecting, preserving and transmitting culture. According to Mbah (2012), Nigeria is a country so richly endowed with language that she has over 400 indigenous languages. Ethnic divisions in Nigeria are linguistically determined. Consequently, the existence of many languages implies the existence of many antagonistic ethnic nationalities. Three languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba were elevated to major languages while the rest are seen as minor languages. This is predicated on the fact that the Hausas, Ibos and Yorubas are the three major tribes in Nigeria. The national language question saw the English language emerging as the lingua franca and the official/national language due to its neutrality in a multi ethno-linguistic and multicultural setting as Nigeria. The language has also been adopted as a medium of instruction in our school system. Ayila (2018) postulated that English Language is one of the valuable legacies left behind by our colonial masters and it plays multifarious roles in Nigeria being the second language, the lingua franca, official language and the language of instruction. The elevation and status of the English Language has been saddled with numerous criticisms and condemnations. Opponents see the language as

elitist in nature, having the tendency of excluding the majority of Nigerians from involvement in, and participation in national issues that concern them. In our education setting, they argue that academic underachievement in Nigeria is traceable to failure to comprehend teaching concepts owing to linguistic deficiencies. Onyeka, Nwamaradi and Chimuanya (2023) established the relationship between thinking and linguistic abilities. They noted that “there is a medium in which we think, and of course it is a language”. This implies that the English think in English, the Hausas think in Hausa, the Yorubas in Yoruba and the Ibos in Igbo. For this reason, Oyekola (2020) perceived it as mental slavery to suggest that Nigeria indigenous languages are not comprehensible for thinking, for scientific studies and by extension, for concept formation. Supporters of the use of the English Language as our official language, the lingua franca and the medium of instruction in schools base their arguments on the fact that the use of the English Language engenders mutual understanding, co-operation and peace in a country bedevilled with too many ethno-political problems. They see it as neutral and have the capacity to be accepted by all as a national language more than any other indigenous language. They also remind their critics that the majority of Nigerian indigenous languages are still in the process of language engineering while some are yet to be codified.

Educational engineers the world over agree that mother-tongue is very useful in the educational process in a multilingual society. Since the educational process builds upon the entering behaviour of a learner at any level into the classroom, the use of mother-tongue as the initial medium of instruction in pre-primary and primary schooling can never be overemphasized especially in a multilingual society where mother-tongue is one of the numerous experiences which children bring to the classroom. Besides, the necessity for mother-tongue programmes as a strong unifying factor in culturally and linguistically diverse populations like Nigeria amongst other numerous usefulness, it is paramount to note here that the structure of Nigeria's education was changed from the 6-3-3-4 system to the 9-3-4. The former runs six years of primary education, three years each of junior and

senior secondary and four years of university education. The latter combines the six years of primary and three years of junior secondary into a continuum of nine years of basic education at the primary level, three years at the secondary level, and four years of university education. According to Oyekola (2020), the duration in years for pre-primary education is not included in this structure but represents the form of education given to children between the ages of three and five years (plus) before proceeding to primary school.

The mother-tongue/language component of the National Policy on Education (2014) specifies that for pre-primary education, the medium of instruction is principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community (Section 2.14c: i, ii). The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first three years (now Basic 1 to 3), during which English shall be taught as a subject. From the fourth to sixth year (now Basic 4 to 6), English shall progressively be used as the medium of instruction while the language of the immediate environment shall be taught as a subject (Section 3.17e, f).

For Junior Secondary School (now Basic 7 to 9 of primary school), English is the medium of instruction while the language of the immediate environment shall be taught as a subject where it has orthography and literature but where it does not, it shall be one of Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba (i.e. one major Nigerian language) taught with emphasis on oracy (Section 4.21: ii). For Senior Secondary School (now three years of secondary education) English is the medium of instruction, and one of Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba studied as a major Nigerian language (Section 4.23b).

The National Policy on Education (2014) specifies that Government shall ensure that the medium of instruction in the pre-primary school is principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate environment while English is studied as a second language at the lower levels of primary school (years 1-3) and mother-tongue at the higher levels (years 4-6). To accomplish these, the Nigerian government resolved to develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages, produce textbooks in Nigerian languages, and train specialized teachers. It is the extent of implementation of these aspects of the mother-

tongue/language component of the NPE in the pre-primary and first six years of basic primary education that this study attempts to assess.

In Nigeria, the use of local languages or vernacular is banned in most schools, this suggests why the World Bank, in a recent report about the standard of education in Nigeria, stated that the poverty in which 70 percent of 10-year-olds cannot understand a simple sentence or perform basic numerical tasks. Similarly, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), in its review, noted that children whose primary language is not the language of instruction in school are more likely to drop out of school or fail in early grades. According to Iyabo (2023), recent successful initiative to promote mother tongue language-based education has taken place in Djibouti, Gabon, Guinea, Haiti and Kenya. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as cited in Iyabo (2023) had noted that a child's first language is the optimal language for literacy and learning throughout primary school. In spite of growing evidence and parental demand, a lot of educational curricula around the world insist on exclusive use of one, or sometimes, several privileged other languages.

As part of efforts to tackle learning difficulties, the Federal Government recently approved a new National Language Policy, which makes mother tongue a compulsory medium of instruction for public primary schools. According to Iyabo (2023), the Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu, said the mother tongue would be used exclusively for the first six years of education, while it will be combined with English language from Junior Secondary School. The mother tongue to be used in each school would be the dominant language spoken by the community where it is located. According to Fafunwa (1975), adopting indigenous language at the primary education level would raise the bar of teaching and learning and it would move the country in joining global powers that have advanced in science and technology as the pupils will assimilate better in mother tongue than English. Iyabo (2023) concurred that North Korea, which is becoming a world nuclear force, hardly writes in English Language. The author further stated that India which today has become a choice place

for medicine, teaches and publishes more in mother tongue than English Language and China is a developed country and leads in technology, construction and infrastructure. They hardly speak English and all their books are written in their local languages.

Nigeria can actualise this; it will be a quantum leap in our educational development as well as a broad pathway towards achieving the much-desired breakthrough in medicine, science and technology. The policy would help the pupils to learn more effectively and efficiently. Although, some scholars are of the view that the failure of the Federal Government to train enough teachers is yet another obstacle to the smooth take-off of the policy.

### Concept of Mother Tongue

Mother Tongue (MT) is the language of the parents especially that of the mother. The emphasis is placed much on the mother because there is what is called 'care giver language'. It is the linguistic interaction between the child and the mother because mothers have more time with their children. The term mother tongue is variously interpreted. Some take it to mean the child's first language. According to Duze (2011), mother tongue is a language in which a bi or multilingual person conducts his everyday activities and in which he has the greatest linguistic facilities or intuitive knowledge. Similarly, Onyeka et al (2023) viewed mother tongue as the language you first learn to speak when you are a child. They went further to add that it is the form of language that is spoken in one area with grammar, words and pronunciation that may be different from other forms. Mother tongue is synonymously used with other terms like dialect and language of the immediate community. So, when we talk of mother tongue and dialect, we mean the form of language which the child first learns within his immediate locality or community. In the same vein, Udu (2023) maintained that *mother tongue or mother language* refers to a child's first language, the language learned in the home from older family members. The everyday use of the word refers to 'the language known best, used most, liked best' (Kroon, 2003). Mother tongue refers to one's native language, i.e., the language of one's mother

or the language one speaks with one's mother—more generally, the language that is provided by a child's direct attendants in the home, without any participation of educational institutions (Kroon, 2003). Nordquist in Udu (2023) also describes mother tongue as not only the language one learns from one's mother, but also the speaker's dominant and home language; i.e., not only the first language according to the time of acquisition, but the first with regard to its importance and the speaker's ability to master its linguistic and communicative aspects. Mother tongue according to this study is a language which one uses to acquire the basic necessities of life, dreams about and can convincingly use to dream of other things.

### **Mother Tongue Can Promote the Child's Academic Achievement/Growth**

The relationship exists between language and the mind is such that language is a reflection of the mind and a means of conveying knowledge and information stored in the mind. Language plays an important role in learning at any level of education. The normal teaching-learning process thrives on effective communication by which the teacher and his/her learners are required to command the language of instruction. This means that no matter how expertly learning experiences are selected and organized, the ultimate objective of the teaching-learning exercise; which is a change in behaviour, would not occur if the teachers cannot relate these experiences in the appropriate language.

The child acquires traditional education from his parents and other relevant persons through mother tongue. It is through this medium that he gains all the experiences and knowledge that are fundamental and sustainable to his formal education. This agrees with the view of Nwali, (2014) that before the child leaves for school, he must have learnt many things from his parents such as speech, names of people, animals and other objects around him. He adds that the child can also make simple statements, answer simple questions and must have observed his parents performing one domestic duty or the other. Thus, the home provides the first informal educational instruction to which the child is exposed and prepared to face formal education actively, he

argues. According to Udu and Oyetunde (2020), mother tongue is an ideal tool for the development of literacy. The authors further stated that children who learn in their mother tongue achieve better than those who receive instruction through the second language. Literacy scholars recognize the mother tongue as the base for literacy development.

Research evidence shows that instruction using the mother tongue is more efficacious in students' academic outcomes. In one study, Thomas and Collier (1997) reported that: When students do academic work in their primary language for more than two to three years, they are able to demonstrate with each succeeding year that they are making more gains than the native English speaker and closing the gap in achievement as measured by tests in English across the curriculum. Similarly, Thomas and Collier (2017) reported that English-only and transitional bilingual programs of short duration only close about half of the achievement gap between English learners and native English speakers, while high quality long-term bilingual programs close all of the gap after 5-6 years of schooling through two languages (L1 and L2).

In another study, Alimi, Tella, Adeyemo, and Oyeweso (2020) determined the effectiveness of mother tongue instruction on the achievement of primary five (V) pupils in literacy and numerical skills in Osun state and found that there was a significant difference in the achievement of pupils taught with mother tongue and conventional strategies in literacy and numeracy skills ( $F(2,232)=27.94$ ). Pupils exposed to mother tongue strategy had highest post mean literacy and numerical skills (70.47). A recent study by Onyeka, Nwamaradi, and Chimuanya (2023) determined the effect of mother tongue on primary school pupils' academic achievement and interest in Mathematics in Abia State, Nigeria. The study found that the use of mother tongue significantly improved students' achievement more than use of English language ( $P=0.000, p < 0.05$ ).

### **The Place of Mother Tongue in the Development of Pre-Literacy Skills**

According to Udu and Oyetunde (2020), the mother tongue is inevitable in the development

and sustenance of appropriate pre-literacy skills such as sorting, grouping, counting, naming, scribbling, pattern writing, drawing, etc.

1. The child first learns names of objects and things within his environment through the mother tongue. With this basic experience and knowledge, he is prepared for formal education.
2. It is also through the mother tongue that the child acquires local knowledge of Mathematics such as counting, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, measurements, telling the time as well as buying and selling activities. Later on, when he goes to school, he transfers all this knowledge he has acquired in the local form to the learning of formal Mathematics.
3. The mother tongue is used to teach the child folktales, riddles and proverbs at home. Through folktales, he learns figures of speech and other relevant expressions that will make him to develop interest in literature when he goes to school. Folklore through mother tongue will also help to sharpen the child's memory, develop him socially and increase his vocabulary too. Nwali (2014) remarked that folklore is not only a valuable education device; it is also valuable in maintaining a sense of group unity and group worth.
4. Outside the home circle, the child and his peer play, discuss, quarrel or argue issues together using mother tongue. He also hears elders and other members of the society telling stories, discussing matters and issuing words of advice in their dialect. The knowledge which the child acquires during such interactive forum equips him with experiences that help to facilitate his academic ability in the school.
5. The knowledge of mother tongue enables the child to understand the similarities or differences between synthetic structure of English language and mother tongue. With such knowledge of mother tongue, it aids children's explanation or interpretation of difficult concepts during the teaching and learning of English Language and other school subjects.

### **Problems militating against the Child's Opportunity to speak his Mother Tongue**

A lot of children face problems in the acquisition of their mother tongue. Such problems include:

1. **Dwelling outside the Home:** Aruya (2015) stated that some parents, with their children, leave their homes or places of origin to dwell at other places with entirely different language background. In such a situation, the opportunities of their children to learn their mother tongue is reduced or lost completely due to dominance of the host dialect or language. For example, children born by Igbo parents in Hausa or Yoruba land are more exposed to Hausa or Yoruba language. This therefore, inhibits their chances of speaking Igbo.
2. **Imposition of Another Language/Dialect:** According to Nwali (2014), there are parents who take greater interest in another language to the detriment of their own language. They persuade their children to speak the borrowed language instead of their own. For example, some parents believe that English Language is superior and therefore will portray their children's intelligence or facilitate their high academic achievement in the school. As a result of such understanding, they compel them to speak English always. Their medium of communicating with their children is predominantly English language.
3. **Couples Belonging to Different Tribes:** Cases where the husband and wife come from different tribes or language background exist. In such a situation each of them may prefer their child/children to speak his/her own dialect as a way of perpetuating it. Nwali (2014) stated that when there is such competition, the child/children is/are usually exposed to dialects which in the final analysis lands him/them in speaking the mixture of the two. Sometimes, the parents may resort to the option of communicating with their children in English language to avoid competitions or favouring either of the dialects.
4. **Lack of Orthography:** Most dialects unlike full-fledged languages such as English, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, lack orthography. As a result of this deficiency, they are not written or read. Nwali (2014) asserted that for this

reason, children's chances of learning them are limited to what they can hear their parents and other close persons speak.

5. **Early Childhood Care and Education Programme:** Early Childhood Care and Education Programme are fast spreading in various parts of the country, unlike before. Children aged 0-5 years that the programme is meant for are sent to kindergarten or nursery centres. In most cases, the caregivers' medium of communication/instruction to the children is English language as against mother tongue which the National Policy on Education (2014) stipulates.

### **Revitalising Indigenous Languages that are Endangered**

A language is said to be endangered if it is at risk of losing all of its speakers (Hoffmann, 2009). When a language is perceived to be endangered or critically endangered, one of the critical steps to take is to revitalize it. To revitalize means to restore or strengthen a particular language in regions where it prevailed before being displaced by other, more powerful or prestigious languages (Comajoan-Colomé & Coronel-Molina, 2021).

### **Practical Tips and Strategies for Revitalizing Indigenous Languages that are Endangered**

Udu, (2023) postulated that, revitalising endangered indigenous languages could be done using a wide range of approaches or strategies like the following:

1. Increased use of the language by native speakers, children and other learners. Language is an important heritage which can only be maintained if spoken at all times. As such, native speakers of the language and parents should pass this legacy through proverbs, folktales, songs, religious worship, writing and so on.
2. Teaching the language in schools. Making the language a subject in the school curriculum will definitely lead to not just producing more speakers of the language but leaving a legacy for the future.
3. Modernizing the language. This can be done by allowing the inclusion of new vocabulary through coining and borrowing and improving the existing orthography.

4. Periodically, organising workshops, talks, conferences on aspects of the language.
5. Since we are in a digital era, stakeholders should encourage the development of computer applications that encourage the teaching and learning of indigenous languages in schools.

### **Benefits of Preserving the Mother Tongue**

The benefits of preserving our mother tongues are numerous. Udu (2023) has highlighted the benefits of using the mother tongue stating that:

1. It is the foundation for learning other languages.
2. It helps the user to better understand their own culture and identity.
3. It allows the user to communicate with their family and community members who may not speak other languages.
4. It can give the user a competitive edge in the job market.
5. It can help the user to better understand the nuances and subtleties of language itself.

### **Practical Ways of Encouraging the Use of Mother Tongue and Passing it on**

According to Udu (2023), parents, teachers, adults, religious and cultural organisations, and the government can promote the use of mother tongue in homes, schools, worship centres and the public in a wide variety of ways such as:

1. Promoting the use of the mother tongue for programmes on radio stations, television stations, and the social media.
2. Naming new born babies with indigenous names
3. Reviving cultural entertainment activities in schools like cultural carnivals, dance competitions, clubs and society and using the mother tongue in places of worships.
4. Teaching of the mother language youths with relevant qualifications and making it an examination subject in schools
5. Acting movies, promoting films and songs that are produced in indigenous languages.
6. Sponsoring reading and writing competitions in the mother tongue
7. Printing, publishing and translating reference books into the mother tongue.
8. Awarding certificates, Diplomas and

Degrees in indigenous languages.

9. Government ensuring that the provisions of the National Language Policy are complied with by schools and proprietors of schools.
10. Encouraging the development of computer applications that promote the easy learning and mastery of reading and writing in indigenous languages.

### Conclusion

Mother tongue is the hub for teaching and learning process and child's literacy in general. Therefore, parents, teachers, youths, traditional rulers, religious leaders, socio-cultural organisations, indigenous scholars and government should team up in the efforts at preserving and promoting indigenous languages. Countries of the world like China and Malaysia are ruling the world in technology because ideals are created in their native languages. There is a possibility of achieving the same goal in Nigeria if ideals are created in their native languages.

### Recommendations

1. Children should first of all be introduced to their mother tongue or language of their immediate communities.
2. Parents should ensure that they speak their language with the children at home.
3. Government should formulate good language policies to promote the indigenous languages and ensure that all the language policies formulated are fully implemented.

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