Challenges in the Implementation of Mother Tongue Education in Nigerian Schools: The Way Forward
Adamu Salihu Mahuta
Department of General Studies Education Adamu Augie College of Education, Argungu

Corresponding Author: Adamu Salihu Mahuta salihumahuta20@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Education Mother Tongue, Mother Tongue Education, Implementation

Received : 2 January
Revised : 17 February
Accepted: 17 March

©2024 Mahuta: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Atribusi 4.0 Internasional.

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at pre-primary and primary levels of education is very vital for educational development of our children. Researches have shown that the child learns better and quicker his mother tongue is used in instruction than using a foreign language (English). This paper discusses the provision made by national policy on education (NPE) on the relevance and importance of mother tongue in education. It also highlights the benefit of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at both pre-primary and primary levels. In addition, the challenges of implementation of mother tongue education are not left un discussed, the effective way to the implementation of mother tongue education in Nigeria, finally followed by the conclusion
INTRODUCTION

Mother tongue is used to denote child’s first language (L1), and is the language that a child acquires first in life. Mother tongue based instruction in a child’s first language usually with a planned gradual transition to a second language (L2) or foreign language at a specified time in primary school (Nyanged, Ambiyo, 2014). The language of instruction is very crucial in education at every level as it serves as the key to education, especially at primary level where many children come in contact with formal education for the first time. It is generally believed that the child creativity is enhanced if he/she comes to meet an already familiar language at school. In contrast, a child’s spirit of innovation may be inhibited if he/she is confronted with unfamiliar language at school (Olagoke, 1997 In Simeon, 2014). The issue of medium of instruction has been of great concern to various governments and many agencies involved in the education since the introduction of western education in Nigeria, the major concern is to ensure that children are instructed in most appropriate language at least at the initial level of education, i.e. pre and primary school levels. The use of mother tongue in education in Nigeria is as old as the introduction of western education the country. This is for the fact that even the colonial masters had emphasised on the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the lower level of primary education. Many problems or challenges are faced in the implementation of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in Nigerian education system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Provision of National Policy on Education (NPE)

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 1997) revised in (NPE, 2016) has specified pronouncement on the importance of language to educational system. For pre-primary education, the policy provides, thus:

“Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or language of the immediate community”.

The policy makes provision for primary level of education on the relevance of language to education. The policy also provides that:

“Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage English”. NPE, par.15 (4) primary education.

And is section 3:15 of the same document it is stated that:

At the primary level, government will see to it that the medium of instruction is initially the mother tongue or the language of immediate community, and at a later, English.

One can easily deduce that the above statement of the policy for both pre and primary levels recognizes the importance and appropriateness of mother tongue to children. And it requires English to assist the mother tongue at later stage. But for pre-primary education mother tongue should be the medium of instruction from the beginning to the end of the level as the policy suggests.
METHODOLOGY

Researches have shown that the child learns better and quicker his mother tongue is used in instruction than using a foreign language (English). This paper discusses the provision made by national policy on education (NPE) on the relevance and importance of mother tongue in education. It also highlights the benefit of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at both pre-primary and primary levels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mother Tongue

The term mother tongue (MT) has been given many different definitions by different scholars. Mills (2000) sees mother tongue as any of the following: the first language a child speaks, the language spoken at home, the language in which the child is most competent, and the language of child’s community. Likewise, Simeon (2007) added that mother tongue in the context of Nigeria raised some controversies based on Mill’s definition as he looks at mother tongue as the language in which the child is most competent on would suggest that there are some Nigerian children whose English would be their mother tongue. For example, Biron children in Plateau state for whom Hausa rather than Biron would have been their mother tongue, etc.

According to UNESCO 1963 in Simeon (2007) mother tongue is the “language which a person acquires in the early years and which normally becomes his natural instrument of thought and communication”. UNESCO argues that a child’s mother tongue may not be the language used by child’s parents or the first language he or she speaks as special circumstance can cause him to abandon this language more or less complete at an early age. Mother tongue may also mean the language spoken at home of the child that is “home language”. It also means the indigenous language among others.

Concept of Mother Tongue Education

Mother Tongue Education as a concept is important to be clarified here. In the Nigerian context Mother Tongue Education involve teaching all school subjects with the exception of English using the child’s native language as a medium of instruction from primary one to primary six, and English will be taught only as a subject. But according to national policy on education provision for mother tongue, it is only the language of instruction at pre-primary and lower primary classes and at later stage English will be used as a medium of instruction. For the context of this paper, Mother Tongue Education implies teaching all school subjects (except English) using child’s mother tongue or native language as a medium of learning from primary one to six.

Benefit of Mother Tongue Education on the Education of Nigeria Child

Mother Tongue Education is very important for the education of a child in numerous ways. In other words, giving instruction in child’s native language is of great significance to educational development for many reasons. Thus: In the first place, it is admired that a child learns better in his or her mother tongue based on researches a eight year life project 1970-1978(Odumah, 2007). This is so because it is the language he/she is used to at home, at play, and in
most cases the language of instruction and socialisation. The school only helps to
perfect the learning of those indigenous languages.

Secondly, Folasade (2012) observed that “concepts are best learnt in
indigenous languages and are therefore more meaningful to the child than those
learnt in second or foreign language. The child could learn better if he /she is
made familiar with these foreign concepts by adapting and translating them to
his/her mode of experience. In addition, in a report released in 1953 UNESCO
endorsed the relevance of mother tongue education. It asserts that:

*It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue,
psychologically; it is system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for
expression and understanding. Socially, it is in the means of identification among
members of the community to which he/she belongs. Educationally, a child learns more
quickly through mother tongue than through unfamiliar linguistic medium.*

Mother tongue education should be the ideal situation in all educational
development. To ascertain this all developed countries or nations of the world
educate their children though mother tongue as a medium of instruction and
communication. Japan, USA, Norway, Russia, for example. Even some of the so
called developing use the first language of their children in their education, e.g
China, India, South Korea, and Malaysia. Furthermore, Folasade (2012) added
that the mother tongue is the most useful language to a bilingual child in the
formative stage of life. It is also the means to his/her attitudes and aptitudes are
best developed. The child should be encouraged in his first twelve years in life to
master his mother tongue for positive development of his physical, mental, and
intellectual potentials.

Finally, a number of Nigerian scholars (for example Chumbow 1990,
Cummins 2005) have advocated the use of mother tongue for the teaching of
whole primary education. Advocates of mother tongue in Nigeria cites the
famous six year Ife primary education project as evidence that mother tongue
education is practicable in Nigeria. The aim of the project was to show that
primary education in mother tongue was likely to produce better result than the
prevailing practice of switching from mother tongue to English at upper primary
level. The result of the project revealed that the pupil taught in mother tongue
performed better than those taught using English language (Simeon, 2007).

**Challenges in the Implementation of Mother Tongue Education**

In relation to the above discussion given on the importance of mother tongue
education of a child and the findings which reveals that pupils learnt better in
their mother tongue than when English was being used as a medium of
instruction as well as the emphasis given by national policy on education in the
use of mother tongue in pre-primary and lower primary levels of education in
Nigeria. Yet the implementation of mother tongue education faces a lot of
challenges for the fact that is not properly implemented. Thus:

- The attitude of Nigerians is usually that of scorn what is indigenous and
  warm embrace for what is foreign. This is one of the reasons why most
  parents of children at nursery or pre-primary level particularly the private
  own ones prefer the use of English as a medium of instruction for their
  children instead of mother tongue. the supervisors of instruction at primary
  and secondary schools do not bother themselves about what is going on in
the private schools, they tract their visits to only public schools. Further more, most parents are of the belief that English as a foreign and international language is a vehicle of gaining employment and a ladder for social status, they therefore see mother tongue as a medium of instruction is at the disadvantage of their children in the sense that it is not recognized language internationally.

- Another challenge is the lack of qualified professional teachers to teach indigenous languages. Most teachers are not professionally grounded in the mother tongue education that they are expected to teach. The teachers may also have come from different language environment from that of their class children. And the remuneration is very low and therefore these teacher slack the motivation and zealot put in their best (Akindele, 2005).

- Funding is another challenge that hinders the implementation of mother tongue education. The provision of necessary materials, facilities, and equipment is poorly inadequate. There are insufficient textbooks, reader and other literacy materials in schools handle mother tongue education properly. It is generally observed that many primary schools do not have library and where is available it is ill-equipped. Furthermore, book production in the indigenous languages is quantitatively far less than in English. Bangbose, 1992 has stressed that some problems faced by mother tongue education for primary education are multiplicity of languages, lack of teachers, textbooks multilingualism or Multilanguage, orthography, and pressure of hetenogeneity in the classroom especially in the urban areas. More so, lack of awareness on the part of the highly placed ministry officials, supervisors, inspectors of education, principals, headmasters, teachers and practicing teachers of language policy as stated in National Policy on Education

- Dominance of English languages the official language in Nigeria is another challenge that makes the Nigerians indigenous languages to be inferior. Oyetade (1992) has put that “English has become the Nigerians official languages as well as dominant language of education. It is used in its written form as the language of administration from federal to local government level. It also use as language of commerce and of politics”. Likewise, Igboanusi and Peter (2005:11) focused that in Nigeria, “the dominance of English is overwhelming in practically all domains; government and administration, education, the mass media, the parliament, the judiciary (excluding sharia courts), science and technology, and literacy creativity. It is also the language of inter-ethnic communication. Hence, this general domination of English to almost all Nigerian activities makes the indigenous languages ro lack prominence to the perception of elites, and the government stakeholders as result they shun the proper implementation of mother tongue education in the country.
The Way Forward

For mother tongue education to have a successful implementation in Nigerian education system, the following need to observe:

- Adequate fund need to be provided by the government and other agencies for primary level of education for the purchase of adequate facilities and equipment such as textbooks, and possibly well equipped library for indigenous language materials for effective implementation of mother tongue education.

- Government should employ professionally indigenous language teachers in primary schools and retrain them through workshops, seminars to get them more qualified. This should be accompanied by high remunerations for the teachers to motivate them to have the zest and zeal in carrying out their duty (ies) effectively.

- Effort should be made by the government to develop positive attitude towards indigenous language among Nigerians particularly the elites. In other words, People in Nigeria should be made to be aware of the importance of mother tongue to the education of their children at primary school levels.

- There should be deliberate policy to get Nigerian languages ready for primary education in terms of good planning, standardisation, material development, and teacher training.

Each local government education authority should saddle its supervisory unit with the responsibility of ensuring adequate monitoring of the implementation of mother tongue education. And for the parents who prefer their to instructed in English I pre-primary and primary levels should be made aware that Nigerian constitution or any policy statement is binding on all the citizens. Thus, there is need for stake holders I education industry to ensure that the implementation of mother tongue education is fully entrenched at both primary and pre-primary levels.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Using mother tongue of the child (L1) AS a medium of instruction in education at formative stage of child’s life is very important to child education. There should proper implementation of the policy such that proper result will be yield. Teachers need to be trained, parents and community members be encouraged to change their attitudes towards accepting indigenous languages to be used in teaching their wards. Let them be aware that teaching their wards using the indigenous language is better than using English language as a medium of instruction for effective development of education and the learning efficiency of their children which they prefer.

The following will form some food for thought:

- encourage active participation and involvement of various bodies (e.g. the community and other partners)
- Legitimize the languages within the school and making them compulsory for all. No certificate without them.
- Respect local languages by giving them pride of place in the scheme of things and enrich them.
For Nigerian languages to be teaching tools, they must go beyond just describing the legend of the forest and be able to handle things such as scientific plant evaluation and the green house affect (UNESCO, 2003).

- Children should be made to share languages in the class. (E.g. a child is made to bring one word from home language in to the class and the entire class learns and discusses that word).

- Terminological database have to be compiled to review all the words and expressions in it. Then invent new words to describe the legal commercial, diplomatic, and technical aspects of modern life.

- Children should be encouraged to write in their mother tongue in addition to the majority school language. They can be made to write and publish pupils-authored bilingual books, pamphlets, magazines, etc.

- The government should be ready and willing to mount campaign on and enforce the use of the language policy on Nigerians.

- The government should also provide adequate funds for the policy to succeed.

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations so further research needs to be carried out regarding the topic Challenges in the Implementation of Mother Tongue Education: The Way Forward in order to perfect this research and increase insight for readers.

REFERENCES


