

## **Survey of Teachers' Opinions on Mother-Tongue Instruction in Nigerian Nursery Schools: Implications for Educational Policy Making**

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### **Abstract**

*This study was carried out to find out teachers' views on the programme of mother-tongue instruction in nursery schools in Nigeria. Questionnaire was used to seek the teachers' opinions on the issue of mother tongue as language of instruction in nursery schools in Nigeria. It was found that most teachers support the programme of using mother tongue as a medium of instruction in nursery schools. Also, it was discovered that some problems would confront the implementation of the programme. Implications of the findings for children's education were discussed. Lastly, suggestions were made towards solving the problems of mother tongue instruction in nursery schools.*

### **Introduction**

Since the dawn of formal education in Nigeria around the 1840s, English Language has always been the major medium of expression in the established missionary schools. It is not surprising as the saying goes, "He who blows the piper dictates the tune". The Missionaries used English Language as a "civilizing mission" while their counterparts in administration went ahead to use English Languages as a strong political administrative force, because it was the official language during the colonial era. Eventually, English Language became the official language of the British West African countries. It would be suggested that the whites had no other alternative if they were really serious about achieving their objectives other than to impose their language on the colonized Africans.

Emphasis on the use of English Language is still much felt in educational institutions in Nigeria as the various policies of education have always classified the subject as a major discipline. Examples include the 1882 Educational Ordinance, which capitalised on English Language for its effectiveness. It put considerable status on English language. The importance of the subject (even after independence) is much more felt in the educational sector it would not only be an up-hill task for a student without at least a pass in English Language to gain admission into any of the higher institutions in Nigeria, it is extremely impossible to gain admission into any university without a pass in the subject. The current National Policy on Education (NPE) indicates the importance of English Language despite its preference for the Nigerian child's mother tongue as the medium of instruction in nursery and the first three years of primary education.

Having considered very briefly the emphasis laid on the importance of English Language in the curriculum through government policies it is necessary to add that some educators frowned at the arrangement. They argued in favour of the use of mother tongue as a medium of communication and instruction in the classrooms. Despite the provision the National Policy of Education for the use of the local language in the nursery and first three years of primary education in Nigeria, it seems as if the reality of the policy is still being awaited since the schools still use English Language as their medium of instruction at the two levels that are specifically medium for the promotion of the use of mother tongue.

### ***Trends in the Use of Mother Tongue***

Olowookere (1991) indicates that the first language of the child is what is referred to as the Mother Tongue. He writes that,

It is now taken as a language which a group of people considered to be the inhabitants of an area acquired in their early years and which normally becomes their natural instrument of thought and communication.

A landmark in Nigeria clamour for the use of Mother tongue came into being when a provision in the National Policy on Education (NPE) (1977, revised 1981) reveals a strong preference for the use of the Nigeria child's mother tongue or the language of immediate community as the medium of its nursery education and the first three years of primary education. Section 2 Article 11 (3) of the NPE states that: "To achieve the above objectives, Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community". (p.10). It however indicates that the Ministries of Education should approve and supervise the establishment and the running of nursery schools.

It must be pinpointed here that prior to this period of NPE's provision for the use of the child's mother tongue in the nursery and early years of primary school education, there was no government policy supporting the use of local language to teach other subjects. The motive behind the use of mother tongue needs to be examined. It is evident that human beings and perhaps animals communicate and understand themselves most when their language or mother tongue is used.

Fafunwa (1982) argues that if the Nigerian child is to be encouraged from the start to develop curiosity, initiative, industry, manipulative ability, spontaneous flexibility, manual dexterity, mechanical comprehension and the co-ordination of hand and eye, he should acquire these skills and attitudes through his mother tongue.

Evidence has shown that one could best express himself/herself when one speaks his/her original language. Agun (1991) wrote "that the philosophy behind the encouragement of the use of mother tongue in the primary schools is the belief that a child will learn faster and better if he is taught in his mother tongue at the early stage of his education. It is believed that the use of the mother tongue will give a child firmer, more solid and enduring foundation for his subsequent academic, social and cultural development in life". He indicated that the advantages in the use of mother tongue to teach pupils include helping a child:

- to acquire facts and information easily and quickly;
- to interpret information obtained properly and correctly;
- to acquire practical and manipulative skills easily and quickly;
- to develop practical and manipulative skills easily and quickly;
- to acquire and develop desirable attitudes towards peoples.....

In the same vein, Olowookere (1991) indicated that learning to speak the Mother Tongue is closely related to the growth and development of the child. The child needs guidance, motivation and practice which should be adequately provided in the traditional society when a child is learning his mother tongue.

Apart from identifying our dreams with our mother tongue, Olowookere declared that the America, English German, French and Italian explore their natural environment and communicate in their native tongue. This assists the acquisition of (at very early stages) self-confidence, initiative, resourcefulness, creative reasoning and adaptability-skills necessary for further growth in later stages of development. His contention was that, a child, if helped to build the foundation of his future development in his own mother tongue or language of his immediate community, would most likely be in a better position to build upon it in later years.

Afolayan (199) was of the view that implication their conclusion for the language of nursery children as peer acceptance depends on children's capacity for friendly and easy communication and that such interactive communication is only possible through a language already mastered by the children and not a language they are just beginning to learn.

Dare (1981) in a survey and critique of language programmes in Nigeria nursery schools was of the opinion that: Education in African countries face enormous hurdles almost before it gets started. The stumbling block is the form of language.

She went on to explain another militating factor against the implementation of the NPE's provision in this regard as shown in the laizes-faire attitude of western regional schools towards compliance.

She wrote, “Yet, despite this official encouragement, pre-primary institutions in the Western section of Nigeria use English almost exclusively”. (p.2)

She, however, concluded that nursery education should be devoted to reading readiness exercise and post-poning reading in the foreign language until primary 1 and that it is necessary to use the child’s mother tongue as the principal medium of his nursery education while beginning to learn basic vocabulary and sentence construction in the second language.

Awoniyi (1982) in his own expression concerning the use of the mother tongue in education indicated that the mother tongue of a child is closely associated with the child’s growth and development. As the child matures, his or her language, personality and experience are expressed.

He therefore saw language as being closely related to culture. He wrote, “the mother tongue is part of culture, it conveys and or transmits culture and it, in turn, is subject to culturally conditioned attitudes and beliefs”. The views of Awoniyi should be noted because of his wealth of experience in both research and teaching of African language particularly Yoruba.

Against the numerous view of the authorities reviewed and the directive in the National Policy of Education on nursery and primary schools, the concerned institutions still run their programmes in English Language thus bringing about what Afolayan (1990) called discrepancy between policy and practices.

However, Dare (1981 a) and (1981 b), Durojaye (1982) and Macauley (1988) argued in favour of the use of English Language as a medium of expression in nursery schools in Nigeria. To them, the maintenance of English rests on the multilingual nature of the locations of nursery schools and possibly on the wish of the parents. Dare (1981) reports that her own independent studies and the findings of Durojaye clearly shows that no less than 80% of nursery schools use English as the medium of instruction and that only one school clearly use Yoruba medium. The reason for this is said to be the fact that pre-primary institutions are privately owned and overworked Ministry officials hardly find time to inspect them. There is also the confusion in respect of which arm of the Ministry is responsible for the inspection of nursery schools. Therefore, private nurseries are able to do and to teach almost everything they want, subject to the approval of their clientele-the parents. The non compliance with the government’s directive along the line, therefore, is based on the motive of making the private schools attractive more to the pupils from such parents who want their children to speak and write English early. She therefore supported Gachukia’s statement (1970:19) on language in Kenyan schools which states that the media of educational instruction in the early critical years of schooling should be based on the use of the mother tongue.

### ***Statement of Problem***

The issue of general acceptability of an indigenous but common language in a multilingual society is an explosive problem. To find out the problems that are connected with the introduction of Mother tongue as a medium instruction in Nigeria, the following research questions are posed:

1. What are the reasons for the programmed of Mother tongue instruction in nursery schools?
2. What problem(s) would the programmes of Mother tongue face if implemented?
3. What are the solutions to the problems identified?

### ***Objectives of the Study***

The study is specifically designed to find out the reasons for the use of mother-tongue instruction in nursery schools in Nigeria.

It is to indicate the problems that would confront the introduction of mother-tongue instruction in pre-primary education in Nigeria.

It is also intended to collate and have an overview of teachers’ opinions on the possible solutions to the problems of mother-tongue instruction in nursery schools in Nigeria.

### ***Research Method***

The subject of this study was school teachers drawn from among those who took part in the 1999/2000 long vacation B.Ed. Sandwich Programme by the Faculty of Education of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

In particular, the subjects were the undergraduate education sandwich students who have taught in at least one level of educational institution. They were therefore individual who could appreciate the meaning and purposes of the use of Mother Tongue as well as the roles of the programme in children's education and overall development.

One hundred teachers were randomly selected out of the sandwich students teaching in nursery schools. Ninety-five teachers returned properly completed questionnaire forms. Out of these were: male (47), female (48). The respondents were from Lagos (16), Osun (22), Ondo (21), Ogun (19). Ekiti (17) states.

Relevant information for the study was collected by the use of questionnaire. Section A of the questionnaire contained a list of items meant to collect information about the bio-data of the respondents. Section B contained a list of reasons in favour of the programmes of Mother Tongue instruction. These statements were adopted from Agun (1991) on reasons for the suggestion of mother instruction in school. Section C contained six statements depicting some probable problems that the programme could face. The respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed with the statements or not.

### ***Teachers' Responses***

|     |   | Yes% | No% |
|-----|---|------|-----|
| 1.  | A programme of mother tongue instruction would make students in nursery schools acquire facts and information more easily and quietly                                 | 70   | 30  |
| 2.  | A programme of mother tongue instruction would allow students to easily interpret information obtained properly and correctly   | 65   | 35  |
| 3.  | A programme of mother tongue instruction would make students use information efficiently and effectively  | 72   | 28  |
| 4.  | A programme of mother tongue would allow students to develop practical and manipulative skills easily and quickly   | 66   | 34  |
| 5.  | The programme of mother tongue instruction would provide students information with ease and accuracy when required.   | 55   | 45  |
| 6.  | The programme of mother tongue instruction would make students acquire and develop desirable attitudes towards people, his country, issues etc.                       | 77   | 23  |
| 7.  | There would be problem of general unacceptability   | 49   | 51  |
| 8.  | The multilingual nature of Nigeria would not allow the programme of mother tongue instruction to work properly.   | 75   | 25  |
| 9.  | There would be problem of training and retraining of teachers if the programme of mother tongue instruction is to work  | 52   | 48  |
| 10. | There would be problem of inadequate teaching/learning resources if the programme of mother tongue instruction is implemented.  | 2    | 74  |
| 11. | There would be the problem of curriculum development in some subjects such as in the Sciences if the programme of mother tongue instruction is put to use in Nigeria. | 35   | 65  |
| 12. | The programme of mother tongue instruction would be unnecessarily uneconomical if implemented in Nigeria.   | 27   | 73  |
| 13. | There would be problem of which local language Nigeria should adopt as National Language.   | 92   | 08  |

### ***Discussion of Findings***

From the data collected, it could be deduced that a programme of mother-tongue instruction would make students in nursery schools acquire facts and information more easily and quickly. Seventy percent of the respondents supported this opinion while 30% objected it. Also, that a programme of mother tongue instruction would allow students to easily interpret information obtained properly and correctly was supported by 65% of the respondents while 35% expressed contrary opinion. In the same vein, 72% of the teachers supported the opinion that the programme of mother tongue would make students use information efficiently and effectively while only 66% of the sampled opinions supported that the programme of mother tongue instruction would allow students to develop practical and manipulate skills easily and quickly, 34% of the respondents expressed contrary view.

Furthermore, the data revealed that more respondents (55%) expressed opinions that the programme of mother tongue would provide student information with ease and accuracy when required whereas 45% of the respondents were against the opinion. 77% supported the view that the programme of mother tongue would make students acquire and develop desirable attitude towards people, his country, issues, etc., whereas only 23% of the respondents expressed contrary opinion. It was found out that 51% out of the sampled teachers went against the opinion that the programme of mother tongue instruction would face the problem of general unacceptability by the parents of the students taught with the programme while 49% agreed with the opinion. While majority (75%) of the respondents indicated that the multilingual values of Nigeria would not allow the programme of mother tongue to work properly only 25% of the respondents disagreed with the opinion. 52% of the teachers opined that there would be problem of training and retraining of teachers if the programme of mother-tongue instruction is to work, 45% of the respondents disagreed. This appears strange. One would normally expect a lower percentage on the negative side. Whereas, 26% of the sampled opinions support the view that the problem of inadequate teaching/learning resources would confront the programme of another tongue instruction, 79% of the respondents however expressed contrary opinion.

Further more, 65% of the sampled teachers indicated that there would be no problem of curriculum development in some subjects especially science subjects, whereas only 35% envisaged that there would be problem. Seventy five percent of the respondents disagreed with the opinion that the programme of mother tongue instruction would be uneconomical while only 27% of the people disagreed. Ninety two percent of the respondents expressed the fear that only one local language would be adopted in Nigeria, whereas only 8% of the teachers did not see any problem along the line.

### ***Summary of Findings***

From the analysis of data, was been found that the opinions of teachers, generally, supported the programme of instruction in the mother tongue. Item numbers 1 to 6 of the questionnaire are about the advantages of a programme of instruction in the mother tongue. The average of the positive responses in favour of the advantages that would accrue from the programme is 67.5% while 32.5% is in the negative.

Also, the analysis of the study reveals that 49% of the respondents agreed that there would be problem of general acceptability (by the parents) of the pupils in the programme of mother tongue instruction in nursery schools in Nigeria. This means that 51% did not agree that the problem of multilingualism would cripple the journey of the programme toward successful implementation.

A further analysis of the data reveals that items numbers 8-13 which envisaged problems for the programme were supported by an average of 49.63% of the responses and those who did not envisage problems had an average of 50.17%. The gap is narrow. It must be remarked that 92% of the responses indicated that there would be a problem of which language to adopt as a national language. The reason is not farfetched; it is because of the multilingual nature of Nigeria.

### ***Panacea to the Problems***

It is recommended that the programme of mother tongue should be well designed by curriculum planners and seriously financed by the various governments in Nigeria. the programme, if adequately executed would improve the knowledge of the young ones and prepare them for future academic endeavours. Adequate provision must be made to convey real meanings of scientific and technical terminologies. Teachers should be trained to use instructional materials adequately for effective comprehension of concepts. Teachers should be trained to bring about the development of adequate human resources for the effective implementation of the programme. The programme of mother tongue instruction should be pilot tested in the primary school before it is extended to post primary institutions.

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