TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF MOTHER TONGUE INSTRUCTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS FOR ACTUALIZING EDUCATION FOR ALL

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Abstract
The study was aimed at assessing teachers’ perceptions of mother tongue instruction in primary schools for actualizing education for all in Nigeria. Descriptive survey design was adopted and a proportionate stratified random sampling technique was used to draw 200 respondents out of 1149 teachers in government owned primary schools in Nsukka Local Government Area. The instrument for data collection was the Mother Tongue Instruction Questionnaire (MTIQ) which consisted of 25 items and was based on a four-point rating scale. The results showed that teachers perceived that mother tongue instruction would be essential for achieving education for all in primary schools. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that government should ensure that primary school curricula and textbooks are written in the indigenous languages and as well monitor the implementation of language policies.

Key words: Education for all, First language, Mother tongue, Mother tongue instruction, Primary education.

Education, which is one of the basic ingredients of life, is the most important instrument for any form of social engineering and moral regeneration in any society. The importance and linkage of education to the development of any society cannot be over emphasized. In affirmation, Keta (2010) opined that society that toys with its education stands the risk of going into extinction because it toys with its future and what the future may bring along with it. Most aims, objectives and aspirations of any society are only realized through the provision of relevant education.

In recognition of the importance of education to the society, the international community and governments all over the world have made commitments for citizens to have access to education. This recognition is exemplified in the establishment of Education for All (EFA) goals at
Jomtien (Thailand) in 1990 (to bring the benefits of education to “every citizen in every society”), and reaffirmed at the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar (Senegal), (UNESCO, 2011). In the Millennium Development Goals, established in 2000, the world’s governments (Nigeria inclusive) were committed to achieving universal access to free, quality and compulsory primary education by 2015. To achieve this, the Federal government of Nigeria embarks on Universal Basic Education (UBE). According to the Implementation Guidelines (Federal Republic of Nigeria FRN, 2000:2), the following are the aims/objectives of the programme:

i. Reducing drastically the incidence of drop-out from the formal school system (through improved relevance, quality and efficiency);

ii. Catering for the learning needs of young persons who for one reason or the other have had to interrupt their schooling through appropriate forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education;

iii. Ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills as well as ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning; and

iv. The provision of free universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school going age.

The synergy between UBE and EFA is that the successful implementation of the UBE Programme in the country will definitely facilitate the realization of EFA goals. According to Keta (2010), UBE, which keeps with the expanded mission of Basic Education, is the foundation for sustainable life-long learning. It provides reading, writing and numeracy skills. These life-long learning experiences are provided through a wide variety of both formal and non-formal educational activities with the acquisition of functional literacy as the main target. In Nigeria, Basic Education that aims at achieving Education for All goals come 2015 includes the education provided at primary and junior secondary levels as well as adult and non-formal literacy. However, the scope of this paper is limited to the primary level which is the basic.

Primary education has been regarded as the most important level of education. In affirmation, Osam, Ekpo, Ibe, and Imona (2011) described primary education as the pivot, without which all other educational activities cannot stand. This perhaps may be due to the fact that it is the foundation of the whole educational pursuit, which is expected to provide literacy and enlightenment to the citizens. The importance of primary education can
therefore be seen in the sense that all beneficiaries of the other levels of education by necessity have to pass through this level. What this means is that primary education defined as the education given in an institution for children aged 6-11 years plus constitutes the bedrock upon, which the entire education system is built. Indeed, Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN (2004) acclaimed that the success and failure of the entire education system are determined by primary education. Oni (2008) also posited that primary education is at the heart of the concept of basic education also defined as universalization of access to education. Thus, the FRN (2004) encapsulated that primary education in Nigeria shall be tuition free, universal and compulsory. This is to ensure that primary education is accessible to all. It further stated that everything possible should be done to discourage the incidence of dropping out of primary school. Despite the above policy statements, which aimed at actualizing the EFA goal, Alli, (2012) observed that many school age children in Nigeria are still out of school. World Bank (2006) also noted that in most developing countries, less than 60 percent of primary school pupils who enroll in first grade reach the last grade of schooling. Some factors have been identified to be responsible for such shortcomings in Nigerian situation such as inadequate supply of infrastructure, teachers and facilities (Alli, 2012 and Osuji, 2013). Another problem that could be mitigating against the actualization of the EFA goals in Nigeria is the non compliance to the policy statement on the use of mother tongue or language of the environment as a medium of instruction in the lower primary school.

Language of the environment is the language spoken by the majority of the people within the locality of the school. Most often, this language is usually the mother tongue (MT) of the greater number of the pupils in the school. According to Mbah (2012), the mother tongue (MT) is the first language (FL) acquired by the child. It is the language that the child gets unconsciously from the people around him. Consequently, this MT/FL is the language with which the child first learns to develop his mental, moral and physical power to face challenges of life. Mother tongue has a very powerful impact in the formation of the individual. It has such an important role in shaping one’s thoughts and emotions. A child’s first comprehension of the world around him, the learning of concepts and skills, and his perception of existence, starts with the language that he first acquires – his mother tongue (Aboderin, 2012).

Sequel to the above, mother tongue instruction is imperative in primary school for a smooth transition from home to school as well as encourage continuum in the developmental process of the child. Mother tongue instruction (MTI) is the art of teaching the learners using their
native language as the medium of communication. Foley (2013) referred to mother tongue instruction as education in a child’s first language (L1), usually with a planned gradual transition to a second language (L2) or foreign language at a specified time in primary school. FRN (2004) recognized the role of mother tongue in early childhood education and recommended it for lower primary education. The idea of using MT to disseminate knowledge in the early part of child’s education is apt as demonstrated by the Ife Six Year Project, which proved that teaching and learning is easier conducted in the MT than in any other language. In the project, it was discovered that pupils taught using MT did better than their counter part taught in English. The reason for this is not farfetched because when curriculum content is presented in an unfamiliar language, an enormous amount of time must be spent first teaching children to understand, speak, read and write the L2 or a foreign language (as is the case with Nigeria). Sometimes, it could be extremely difficult, and the child wastes valuable years in the early years that would have been spent in learning to read and learning academic concepts in his MT. Moreover, children who cannot understand the language of the classroom are likely not to demonstrate what they know, ask questions, and participate actively in the class. They may also not be motivated to attend school regularly and in extreme cases, they may withdraw from school.

Conversely, providing primary school pupils with an opportunity to learn in a language they understand starting on the first day of school would confer significant benefits for the education system. The teacher and learner are at home with the learning situation. MTI could improve access to education. For instance, children whose first language is the language of instruction are more likely to start school at age-appropriate times and attend regularly. Not only that, they are less likely to drop out than those who receive instruction in a foreign language. Corroborating this, Huisman (2008) revealed that children who have access to instruction in their MT are significantly more likely to be enrolled and attend school, while a lack of education in a first language is a significant reason for children dropping out of school. Dutcher (2005) also reported that pupils who are taught using their MT are five times less likely to repeat classes and more than three times less likely to drop out. Fafunwa (1978) in Onikoyi (2011) confirmed this by postulating that teaching children in their native language helps to rapidly uncover the child’s innate talents and abilities, discourages drop outs and boost self esteem. The question now is, ‘how far is MTI applied in Nigerian lower primary schools?’

The policy statement on the use of mother tongue at the lower primary education in Nigeria seems to be a mere paper document than a working
document. In affirmation, Mbah (2012) noted that most Nigerian teachers use English as a medium of instruction. Other scholars (Olarenwaju, 1998; Onikoyi, 2011 Aboderin, 2012; Naique, 2012 and Alausa, 2013) exemplified this through their continuous clamour for the adoption of MTI into Nigerian educational system. This non-implementation of the policy statement on the use of MT in teaching at early primary level could be a serious constraint in the nation’s effort to achieve education for all by 2015. This paper was thus designed to investigate teachers’ perception of mother tongue instruction in primary school for actualizing education for all in Nigeria.

Research Questions

Three research questions were raised to guide the study.
1. To what extent does mother tongue instruction in primary schools facilitate education for all in Nigeria?
2. What are the perceived constraints to mother tongue instruction in primary schools?
3. What strategies are needed for the promotion of mother tongue instruction in primary schools?

Method

The study employed the descriptive survey design. The population was 1149 primary school teachers in the 117 primary schools in Nsukka Local Government Area. A total of 200 teachers drawn through proportionate stratified random sampling technique were used.

The instrument for data collection was the Mother Tongue Instruction Questionnaire (MTIQ) developed by the researcher and face-validated by experts in language education and measurement and evaluation at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The instrument consisted of three sections and twenty five items, soliciting answers on the different research questions posed for the study. The respondents were requested to indicate their responses to the questionnaire on a four-point (4points) rating scale with a corresponding value of Strongly Agree (4 points), Agree (3 points), Disagree (2 points) and Strongly Disagree (1 point).

In the analysis of data, mean scores were used to answer the research questions. Items that yielded mean scores of 2.50 and above are accepted as agree while those that fell below 2.50 were rejected.

Results

The results of the study are presented in tables according to the research questions.

1. Research Question 1: To what extent does mother tongue instruction in primary schools facilitate education for all in Nigeria?
Table 1: Mean Scores of Respondents on the Teachers’ Perceptions of Mother Tongue Instruction in Primary Schools for Actualizing Education for All

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Enculturation of pupils within the culture of their society</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Easing of learning difficulty of the child</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Provision of linguistic tools for sustainable development</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Reduction of rate of school drop out</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Enhances easy transition from home to school</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Facilitates understanding and reduces high rate of learners’ failure in examinations</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Encourages self-reliance and resourcefulness</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ability to learn better and faster</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Encourages enrollment and regular attendance to school</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 reveals that all the items 1-9 are essentials of mother tongue instruction for actualizing education for all in Nigerian primary schools, because all the items have mean scores above 2.50 on the four-point rating scale. They were therefore accepted.

Research Question 2: What are the perceived constraints to mother tongue instruction in primary schools?

Table 2: Mean Scores of Perceived Constraints to Mother Tongue Instruction in Primary Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Only the indigenous languages’ curricula are available in the indigenous languages</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Textbooks of other subjects taught in primary school are written in English language</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Most primary school teachers do not have any formal education in the use of indigenous languages during their training</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parents prefer instructing their wards in the English language

Nigerians believe that dominant languages like English is superior to the indigenous languages

Non implementation of the language policy

Resistance to change

Table 2 indicates that teachers perceived the items 10-16 as constraints to the implementation of mother tongue instruction in primary schools. The items have mean scores between 3.43 and 3.86 which were above 2.50. They were therefore accepted.

Research Question 3: What strategies are needed for the promotion of mother tongue instruction in primary schools?

### Table 3: Mean Scores of Strategies Needed for the Promotion of Mother Tongue Instruction in Primary Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Translation of the national curriculum into indigenous languages</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Enlargement of indigenous languages’ vocabulary, especially in the fields of science and technology</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Making all textbooks, readers, support materials, instructional materials, guides and literature books readily available in the indigenous languages</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>The use of indigenous languages as general course in colleges of education</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>In-service teacher education</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Pre-service teacher education</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Public awareness campaigns on the broad benefits of mother tongue instruction</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Monitoring, to ensure implementation of the language policy in primary schools</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Giving incentives to schools that implement the policy on mother tongue instruction

Table 3 shows the distribution of responses on strategies needed for the promotion of mother tongue instruction in primary schools. Questionnaire items 17-25 have mean scores above 2.50 and were therefore accepted.

Discussion

The results presented on table 1 shows that mother tongue instruction is an essential medium for achieving education for all at primary school level. It enhances easy transition from home to school and therefore eases learning difficulty among primary school pupils. Children are not alienated when the same language they speak at home is used during their first contact with school. Mother tongue education not only facilitates learning, it also reduces high rate of failure and rate of school dropout. This finding is in consonance with Mbah (2012) who posited that one of the major roles of mother tongue in national development is in the easing of learning difficulties of the child. This also confirms the earlier findings in the Ife Six Year Project. Children when taught in their mother tongue will not be afraid to go to school or express themselves as they have confidence in their language. This is why Ball (2012) stated that one way to achieve equity in education opportunities and education for all, as well as to counter linguistic and cultural loss is to deliver early childhood education and primary education through mother-tongue.

On table 2, it was established that teachers perceived constraints to the implementation of mother tongue instruction in primary schools to include the following: only the indigenous languages’ curricula are available in the indigenous languages, textbooks of other subjects taught in primary school are written in English language, most primary school teachers do not have any formal education in the use of indigenous languages during their training, parents prefer instructing their wards in the English language, Nigerians believe that English language is superior to the indigenous languages and the language policy is not implemented. This finding corroborates Babalola (2002) who noted that language provision in National Policy on Education is being pursued without any degree of seriousness. According to her, the dominance of English in Nigerian education system has adverse effect on the Nigerian child who can neither think nor express himself adequately in his mother tongue nor in English. Mother
tongue instruction in primary schools will encourage self-reliance and resourcefulness. It will provide strong linguistic tool that will enable the child to participate actively in the classroom.

The study also established on table3 that teachers agree that the strategies enumerated are needed for the promotion of mother tongue instruction in primary schools. Primary school teachers need to be trained on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction. Also, parents and the general public need to be convinced on the importance of giving early training to their wards in the mother tongue. This finding agrees with Okediadi (2010) who advised Nigerians to come out of colonial clutches. This, according to her would enable Nigerians to understand the relationship that exists between literacy and mother tongue education, which must be properly harnessed for human and national development.

**Conclusion**

The right to education is high on the agenda of the international community. It is affirmed in numerous human rights treaties and recognized by governments as pivotal in the pursuit of development and social transformation. Thus, this study set out to ascertain teachers' perceptions of mother tongue as a medium for actualizing education for all in primary schools. Results of the study have shown that instruction in the mother tongue is a veritable tool for attaining EFA goals in Nigeria.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Indigenous languages should be compulsory course for trainee teachers in colleges of education;
2. All primary school curricular, textbooks, readers and literature books should be readily available in the local languages;
3. Government should set out to monitor the implementation of language policy on mother tongue education, since it has been perceived as a way of attaining the EFA goal;
4. Incentives should be given to schools and teachers that implement the MTI policy, and sanction to those who refuse to comply.

**References**


Okediadi, N. (2010). Literacy in the mother tongue: Policy versus preference, a case study of Awka
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