IMPACT OF MOTHER TONGUE ON THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF THE CHILD

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Abstract

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. Against this background, this paper attempted to look into the impact of mother tongue on the academic achievement of the child. Consequently, the meaning of mother tongue was discussed and the various ways through which mother tongue can promote the academic performance of the child were also highlighted. The problems facing the child’s chances to speak his mother tongue were further argued. The paper concluded by advising parents and all those people concerned with child upbringing not to deny children the right or opportunity to speak their mother tongue. Lastly the paper recommended measures to be taken to encourage children to learn and speak their mother tongue. These include frequent interaction with them by their parents in mother tongue and using mother tongue by teachers or caregivers during instructional activities in the school.

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. Adeyemo (1985) 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 Omebe (2002) argued that learning cannot take place without a person, interaction, environment and behavior change.

In the context of this presentation, 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 Browlby (1973), Oguntabe (2001) and Nwadike (2002) are of the view that effective communication channel between parents and children helps to establish harmonious relationship between them. According to them, 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 authorities, 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. Posed as a question therefore, the concern of this paper is “What is the role of mother tongue in the academic achievement of the child?”
Concept of Mother Tongue

The term mother tongue is variously interpreted. Some take it to mean the child’s first language. According to Hawkins (1995), it is the local form of language. Hornby (2010) defined mother tongue as the language you first learn to speak when you are a child. He 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. Hence, the concepts mother tongue, dialect and language of the immediate community apply in the context of this paper.

Mother Tongue Can Promote the Child’s Academic Growth

As said earlier, 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 Omebe (2002) 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.

In more specific terms, the impact of mother tongue on the academic achievement of the child can be summarized as follows:

1. As has already been said, the child first learns names of objects and things within his environment through mother tongue. With this basic experience and knowledge, he is prepared for formal education.

2. It is also through 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 these knowledge he has acquired in the local form to the learning of formal mathematics.

3. 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. As Herskovits in Nwadike (2002) remarked, 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,
translation of English language to mother tongue and vice versa will pose little or no problems at all to him.

6. Knowledge of mother tongue aids children’s explanation or interpretation of difficult concepts during the teaching and learning of English language and other school subjects.

7. A child brought up in his mother tongue has better chances of writing his native or tribal language than one who is brought up in a different language. For example, Igbo children who are born and bred at home write Igbo language better than their counterparts who are born and brought up at other places other than Igbo land.

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:** Some parents, with their children, leave their homes or places of origin to dwell at other places with entire 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:** 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. 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. 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 is fast spreading in various parts of the country, unlike before. Children aged 0-5 years whom the programme are 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 Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) stipulates.

Conclusion
From the discussions made in this paper, it is clear that teaching children traditional education through mother tongue before they go to school makes them to acquire balanced education which helps to boost their academic achievement. In the light of this correlation, parents should always avail their children the opportunity to acquire sound mother tongue that will facilitate their formal education.

Recommendations

In view of the fact that mother tongue promotes the child’s education and academic achievement, it is recommended that:

1. Parents who dwell at other places where the people speak different language or dialect should not allow their own dialect to go into extinction. They should always use it as a medium of interaction or communication with their children and should not stop them from speaking it.

2. Parents who restrict their children to speaking English language only should desist from such act. Children should rather be encouraged to learn their mother tongue before English language. This will help them to acquire the basic linguistic skills that will prepare them to learn, speak and understand English better.

3. The issue of husband and wife belonging to different tribes should not bring conflict into their children’s disposal to learn or speak their dialect. It should be understood, in the first place, that when a woman marries a man from another tribe or language/dialect background, she has come to join the man’s family. As a result of this, she is socially obliged to adapt to the pattern of life obtainable in her new family including the dialect spoken. Under such condition, the children of the parents will be disposed to speak the language/dialect of the father’s community though sometimes with some level of adulteration resulting from the mother’s influence as the child’s first teacher.

4. Since a lot of dialects are yet to have orthography to facilitate their reading and writing, parents, close relations and indeed all those who have the chances of educating the children traditionally should always speak clearly to him in mother tongue and even with figures of speech while interacting with them to help him become expert or at least perform well in speaking it.

5. Now that children’s opportunity to undergo Early Child Care and Education is on the increase, caregivers should always include mother tongue or the language of the immediate community as one of the media for instructing them. Storytelling, folklore, riddles and jokes, nursery rhymes and others, are activities which the teacher should always organize with children using mother tongue.

References


