

# NEGLECT OF MOTHER TONGUE AS THE CAUSE OF FAILURE IN THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this paper is to look at the state of education in Nigeria. The focus was on the neglect of mother tongue as the major cause of failure in the Nigerian Educational System. Language was defined. The importance of language in education was discussed. The language of instruction was shown as the major factor that determines the attitude of the child generally to education. The language policy of Nigeria was reviewed and its short-coming in the pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary institutions were pointed out to show that the foundation was not properly laid. Mother tongue and its educational goal were highlighted. Recommendations were made. The paper concluded that Nigeria would develop scientifically and technologically as the learners learn with ease and understanding in their indigenous languages.

## **Introduction**

Man is endowed with the ability to use language in his day-to-day activities. Language is a very important aspect of man. No form of development is possible without language. Scientific and technological development cannot be possible without language. Without language, there will be no society, as no known society has existed without language. Language is the only special means through which man can communicate. Animals can communicate but their own means of communication is different from that of man and it cannot be regarded as language.

Man uses language to recount the issues in the past, present and future. There is no limit to the use of language to man because man can do exploit in his language at home, in school, church, and the entire aspect of the society.

There would not have been anything like teaching and learning if there is no language.

Every lesson is a language lesson (Grant, 1973), because both the teacher and the student come face to face with the language of instruction. The language of instruction very much determines the attitude of the child generally to education, his class activities and his output finally, that is his achievements or performances. This means that the language the child meets in school the very first time he goes to school at the early stage will go a long way to determine his attitude towards schooling. It will determine whether he will find school interesting, and rewarding or whether schooling will be boring and unfulfilling to the child.

The child performs better if he comes in contact with the language he is familiar with from his home as this will help him to feel at home. This will help his creative mind to develop. But if on the other way round, he comes in contact with foreign and unfamiliar language in school, his innovative and creative mind may be affected as he is totally in a strange environment, very different from that of the home. The child is totally cut off and this affects the learning.

## **Language Policy of Nigeria**

Government of Nigeria recognizes the importance of language to the child and properly states it in the National Policy on Education in 1977, 1981, 1998 and 2004, respectively thus:

Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion, and preserving culture. Thus, every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment.

In the same document under section 2 (c) concerning early childhood/pre-primary education, government states that, Government shall ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. Furthermore, the section 4(e) of Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) 2004 states that, The Medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject.

The question one may ask is "How far is this policy being implemented in our school system?" Right from the nursery school, the pupils are being taught with English language. There is a great demarcation between the home and the school as teachers start from day one to speak English to these children. Some of these teachers know little or nothing about the government's provision for language of instruction in the nursery school. Some of them know about the language policy but feel indifferent about implementing it. They make the children to regard their mother tongue as "*nyama nyama*" language.

At times, some parents get angry when they see the teacher teaching or speaking the mother tongue to their children. They even go as far as withdrawing their children to enroll them in those schools where English language is used as a means of communication. This happens mainly in most private schools. Some parents are happy when they watch their children in nursery schools parroting English, French, Latin or even Arabic during school activities. They proudly come out to spray money on the children.

You can see that the foundation is not properly laid. The child first of all battles with the language before he can understand the lesson

being taught. Mother tongue is the foundation of all learning (Grant, 1973). Right from the onset, the child's sense of reasoning and creativity is hindered. Some parents start right from the nursery school to help their children to cheat. They go to the class teacher to tell him/her that they want their children to come first in their term examinations.

The FRN (2004), states that the medium of instruction in the primary school is the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English is expected to be taught as a subject. The reverse is the case in the implementation of this policy. English language is the language of instruction while mother tongue or the language of the environment is being taught as a subject. Some schools use the period for mother tongue to do other things that they fill that are more important. They don't teach the language of the environment. Their reason is that, since the children know the language of the environment, that going to teach it only amounts to waste of time. This is purely out of ignorance. That the children speak the language does not make them to have mastery of the language. Before anybody can claim mastery of any language, the person must be well grounded in the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. For anyone to master those skills in any language, he or she must be taught the language formally. Mother tongue or the language of the environment should be used as a language of instruction throughout primary schools while English language and French are taught as subjects. They must not be used to replace the language of the environment because children learn more in their language. Hannah Kilham, discovered this in 1828 and used the African languages to teach the children of the ex-slaves of the African origin (Oraka, 1983; Nwadike, 2004).

Proper knowledge of the mother tongue will help the child to learn foreign language, science, technology etc. The English child's mother tongue is English language and that is the

language in which he/she learns sciences and technologies. In most countries of the world, teachers teach Mathematics, Science, Technology etc. to their pupils or students in their mother tongue. This happens in countries like Japan, Germany, China, Italy, Israel etc.

For Secondary Education, one of the broad goals of secondary education is "to prepare the individual for useful living within the society (F.R.N 2004: 18). In specific term, secondary education shall develop and promote Nigerian languages, art and culture in the context of world's cultural heritage. How can this be achieved in the secondary school when mother tongue or language of the environment is not being used as language of instruction in secondary schools? It is only to be taught as a subject as FRN (2004:19), states language of environment to be taught as L1. One major Nigerian language other than that of the environment to be taught as L2. This is not enough to help the mother tongue to achieve its educational goals. Mother tongue should be used as language of instruction and language of communication. Teaching a language alone does not develop the language. The language is supposed to be used for daily activities of man.

At the senior secondary school level, the provision made for the language of environment in the FRN (2004:21), is as a non-vocational elective. The document only recommends a major Nigerian language as one of the core subjects. Any Nigerian language that has orthography and literature etc. is one of the non-vocational elective. This is not proper. The language of environment supposes to be one of the core subjects and also made compulsory for the schools within that environment. If the language of the environment does not have orthography and literature, people should try to provide them. The orthography and literature of any language does not fall from heaven. It was the missionaries that provided orthography for most African languages and other languages in the world.

According to Crystal (1971:45),

There were many other ways in which religious studies and goals promoted languages study. Missionaries have often written the first grammar of Languages, introduced writing or developed methods of language teaching.

Government should provide money and other facilities and encourage the linguists to study the different languages in Nigeria that have not been written down before and provide orthography for them. People did it in those days, at Katsina-Ala College of Education and started teaching Igala, Tiv and Idoma languages in school.

English language, French, German and other languages of the world did not become famous as both national and international languages over night. The native speakers of the languages contributed much in developing the languages by using the languages in their day to day transactions, domestic services, international institutions, religious matters etc. They also taught and learnt the languages in school, do research in them and developed the standard form of the languages. For instance, the English and French we learn in schools today are the standard forms of the languages and we learn them as language 2 (L2). These forms are different from what the native speakers of the languages speak. We cannot do very well in the study of those second languages unless we are well groomed in our own language.

Some people will argue that it is not possible to study the language of the environment because they are not developed and cannot be used as language of instruction. Their reason is that, those languages are not fit as language of instruction because they cannot provide names and expression for certain concepts in Educational system such as Science, Mathematics, Biology, Physics, Technology etc. This is not true. Every language is developed and no language is an island in itself because it can borrow from one language or the other.

Some people argue that since English language has come to stay in Nigeria as a national language, why do we bother ourselves about studying our indigenous languages? We should bother ourselves about our own indigenous languages. Nwadike (2004), states that the most conquest of a people is the conquest through their language. Again, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Latin language dominated the whole world as the language of instruction and language of communication i.e. official language. Other languages of the world like English and French were almost going into extinction until the government and the owners of the languages woke up from slumber and started developing their languages. No one can talk about Standard English today without remembering Henry Sweet and others.

If they had allowed Latin to continue to dominate their own languages, nobody would be talking about French and English languages today. It is not enough to teach a language in school and write books in it. If everybody is not using the language in day-to-day activities, it will eventually die. This is why Latin language went into extinction despite its firmness in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Any society whose language dies is a dead society as well.

No provision was made in the tertiary education section of the national policy for the development of Nigerian languages. Thank God that some institutions have realized the importance of Nigerian languages in the institutions of higher learning and have made them part of the 'General studies' (G.S) in some schools. Effort should be made to make sure that the innovation is universal in all the higher institution in the federation. If the native languages are to perform their roles in national development, both the native speakers of the language and the government must hold them in high esteem.

Language is dynamic and the language development and modernization are continuous exercise. Everybody knows that English language has assumed a high position in the

global world today because of its need and use in diplomatic relation, Science, Technology and Economy. The indigenous languages can be developed to fit into modern scientific and technological culture. If this is done, the individuals and also the entire communities develop to their maximal potentials (Alilonu, 2007). For instance, citizens who are not literate in any foreign language can conveniently contribute ideas and participate in national development for personal and national economic benefits.

### **Mother Tongue and its Educational Goal**

In the area of science, the language of science is different from the conventional language. People have defined science in different ways. Orji (2007), defines science as the knowledge about structure and behavior of the natural and physical world. She further explains that science teaching is the way, which these knowledge about structure and behavior of the natural and physical world are being taught to the learner.

This art of teaching science to the learner is very important especially, in the present dispensation when the whole world is becoming a global village with science, technology and industry becoming pre-eminent in its goal. And for Nigeria to be part of what is happening in the whole world she has to join the race and give science, technology and industry their rightful place in her development plan. A lot of difficulties are militating against the achievement of this goal in Nigerian schools. These problems have been the cause of students' lack of interest, poor attitude, low enrolment and performance in sciences. The major problem faced by learners of science is the understanding of the language of science. There are difficulties in learning the language of science. The reduction of these difficulties depends on the medium of expression whether mother tongue or second or foreign language. In the words of Victor and Lerner (1975), quoted in Olasehinde (2007:4), The goal of all science education is to develop

scientifically literate citizens who think and act rationally. This goal cannot be met if consideration is not given to the influence of the language of instruction on the learner in understanding scientific concepts and applications. In 1951 UNESCO Meeting of Experts categorically states, "It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue" (Olasehinde, 2007).

### **Recommendations**

Effort should be made to provide orthography for all the Nigerian languages. The orthography of most African languages were initially provided by foreigners especially missionaries. The linguists among us can provide orthographies for those languages that do not have orthography presently.

Effort should be made to develop our indigenous languages to fit into modern scientific and technological culture.

Mother tongue or the language of environment should be the language of instruction in our nursery, primary and secondary educational system to help Tor proper teaching, learning, understanding and internalization of the school lessons.

### **Conclusion**

If effort is made by Nigerians to develop and use our indigenous languages in the school system, the Nigerian educational goals will be achieved.

The product of our education will be men and women who have mastered the skills in their various fields of learning. This will wipe away examination malpractice in Nigeria.

Nigeria will develop scientifically and technologically as the learners learn with ease and understanding in their indigenous languages.

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