

Strategizing Mother Tongue as Medium of Instruction in Nursery and Primary Schools in Nigeria

Dr. BELLO MUHAMMAD SHALLAH

Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology
Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

Abstract

This paper examines this policy and its implementation in the Nursery and Primary Schools in Nigeria. This is because the importance of language as vehicle of social cohesion between and among the citizenry of a nation cannot be over emphasised. People that understand one another have confidence in themselves, trust each other and become secured. This condition makes them productive, peaceful and agents of sustainable development. Realizing this, Nigeria policies that mother tongue of the child is to be used to teach him in schools, in the first 4 years of basic education and or at least in the first 3 years of primary school. The paper finally, indicated the problems inherent in the implementation of the policy and recommend solutions to them by proposing a language medium curriculum design to be operated in Nursery and early primary schools in Nigeria.

Key Phrases: Mother tongue, First language (L1), Second Language (L2), other language (L3) Medium of Instruction.

Introduction

The importance of education cannot be overemphasized. It is the bedrock of social and economic development of a nation. Nigeria as a country recognizes the role of education in national and human developments that is why it intends, expects, sets goals, prescribes standards and requirements for quality delivery of education to its citizens. These strategies are incorporated in the document: National Policy of Education (2013), taking with cognizance of rapid socio-economic and political reforms in the country, the nation restructured its educational system into:

Early Childcare Development	-	0 – 4 years
Basic Education	-	5 – 15 years
Post Basic Education	-	3 years
Tertiary Education	-	4 years

Basic education encompasses kindergarten (1 year), Primary education (6 years), and Junior Secondary education (3 years). Post Basic involves 3 years in Senior Secondary Schools and Technical Colleges. Tertiary education is provided in institutions such as Colleges of Education, Polytechnics, Monotechnics and the Universities (Obioma, 2013)

This is covered by the shade of the umbrella of the Philosophy of the country which intends for the citizens to:

- live in Unity and harmony as one indivisible, democratic and sovereign nation founded on the principles of freedom, equality and justices and
- promote inter-African solidarity and world peace through understanding.

The nation feels that this can be actualized through the means of the instrument of education and therefore it bases its Philosophy of education on the following sets of beliefs:

- Education is an instrument for national development and social changes,
- Education is vital for promotion of progressive and united Nigeria,
- Education maximizes the creative potentials and skills of the individual for self-fulfillment and general development of the society.
- Education is compulsory and a right of every Nigerian irrespective of gender, social status, religion, ethnic background and any peculiar individual challenges; and
- Education is to be qualitative, comprehensive, functional and relevant to the needs of the society (FME, 2015 Sec. 1, pp. 13 - 14).

The Policy Statement (2013) has hinted with emphasis that the basis of education in Nigeria is to develop an individual citizen into a sound and effective self and to provide equal opportunities for all at the basic, secondary and tertiary levels formally and informally.

On the basis of constitutional demands for a free and democratic society; a just and egalitarian society; United, strong and self-reliant; a great and dynamic economy; and a land full of bright opportunities for all citizens, the general goals of education in Nigeria are put for:

- development of the individual into morally sound, patriotic and effective citizen;
- total integration of the individual into the immediate community, the Nigerian society and the world.
- provision of equal access to qualitative educational opportunities for all citizens at all levels of education, within and outside the formal system,
- inculcation of national consciousness, values and national unity; and
- development of appropriate skills, mental, physical and social abilities and competences to empower the individual to live in and contribute positively to the society.

Specific goals of Nigerian education are just replica of the general goals except the expression of the intentions for periodic revision of curriculum, collaborating with private sector, NGOs and local community in funding education and promotion of information and communication technology capacity at all levels.

It is one thing to express intentions it is another thing to realize them. In order to fully realize these goals, the government further intended to take measures of ensuring that educational activities become learner-centred; that teaching becomes practical, experiential and supported by IT, that education is related to community needs; that all tiers of government promote setting up of Reading clubs in schools, community libraries and other relevant resources to enhance effective learning; that study of sciences have to be supported and rewarded; that dropouts be brought back to the system; and that every child shall be taught in the mother tongue or language of the immediate community for the first 4 years of basic education.

Medium of Instruction in Nursery and Primary Schools

The teacher uses to teach the learners. It is the language used by the teacher to convey information to all pupils/students. In some cases, such a medium could be an official language of the country or the native mother tongue of the learners.

In countries where the native language is equally the official language for example United Kingdom, the medium of language used by teachers to teach is English. Any person that comes to the UK or US from another country would have to learn the language English so as to be able to join other students in the classroom. This is the case with Germany, France, Russia where German, French and Russian languages are used respectively as medium of instruction in the classroom. It is equally the same in all other countries where their native mother tongue is not only an official language

but also is the medium of instructions. In some countries where more than one language is used in education, their bilingual education teachers are found using more than language to instruct students (Husisa, 2010).

It is important to decide language to be use for instruction because of the effects it can have on how the students learn. The decision should be put against the background that every language spoken in this world represents a special culture, melody, colour and asset to every man. Hence, mother tongue becomes the most precious treatment in our lives (Husisa, 2010).

Nigeria has on this basis of the importance of mother tongue, decides it to be the medium of instruction at least at the lower level of the basic education i.e. that every child shall be taught in the mother tongue or language of the immediate community for the first 4 years of basic education.

The starting point of the basic education is just the terminal point of the Early Childhood Care Education and Development (ECCED) which covers a period of 4 years. The child who is enrolled in this has not yet been completely detached from his parents. His attachment to the mother is still intact and so the language with which he communicates and is communicated to is his mother tongue known as first language or L1 (Obioma 2014).

It is for the need of community and dare need for softening the pains of detaching the child from his mother that the governments decided to strategize that the mother tongue of the child shall be used to tech him. But the question is how this policy is implemented or how to be implemented in our school setting?

Before we answer this question, let us see if this policy is actual a new step in quest for the educational development in this country. Ralph (2009) has glanced in the history of language policy of this country and stated that the nation has witnessed three different kinds of policy statements, which he enumerated as follows:

- The late English Medium Policy (LEN), by which the medium of instruction is a Nigerian language in the first half of Primary education, and English in the second half;
- The Early English Medium Policy (EEM), by which the language of instruction is English for the entire primary course and the Nigerian Language related to only a subject of study.

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- And the postponed English Medium Policy (PEM), by which the Medium of Instruction is a Nigerian Language for the entire primary education course, and English Medium is delayed till the beginning of Junior Secondary education.

From the look of things that happened and still happening in our schools, none of these policies has been effectively handled by the teachers. Thus signified that there must be a problem between policy formulation decision which was guided by politics and those of classroom implementation level. Ralph (2009) has further stated that the non-implementation of the policy has been linked to the insincerity and non-commitment in the conception and formulation of the policy. This is coupled with workings of the market forces insisting to lamp together the contents and taught in some language and the fact that there were more than one language available for the exercise.

The level of insecurity and commitment in the language policy in Nigeria was evident in the 1977 policy statement which goes:

“Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of immediate community, and, at a later stage, English” (FME 1997: 8).

No where in this policy was elaborated until and no one knew what, how much later was at a later stage until 2013 when it was stipulated and restricted that

“Every child shall be taught in the mother Tongue the language of immediate community for the first four (4) years of basic education” (FME 2013: Sec. 15 Paragraph g)

This has explained the implementation strategy for the policy and will continue into the primary education for at least in the first three (3) years after which English shall be taught as subject:

“The medium of Instruction in Primary school shall be the language of immediate environment (Mother tongue inclusive) for the first three (3) years in monolingual communities. During this period, English shall be taught as subject” (FME 2013: sec. 24Paragraph d).

Back to our question of implementation. No where could it be said or seen how this language policy is implemented or is to be implemented. This may probably be because of non existence of formal decision on the language status of Nigeria as to whether the nation is Bilingual or Multilanguage. At the surface, the policy has stated that beside using mother tongue to teach in the at least first three years of primary education, a child is expected in addition to learn one Nigerian language among the three ‘accepted’ major language of Nigeria – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The National Constitution also has that:

“The business of the national assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangement have been made there of” (Sec. 53).

But ‘when adequate arrangement’ has not been known and done and no one can say “when” this can happen and the constitution has been in operation since 1999.

The situation has not been helped by yet another contradictory policy position and constitutional statement that:

“The business of House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may in addition to English conduct the business in one or more other languages that the House may by resolution Approve” sec. 97.

Thus is an instance of non recognition of the whole document of language policy. So, if the House feels it fit, it may or may not) decide to use any or more languages in the conduct of its business. Thus, the nation does not actually decide to be bilingual

of multilingual, by implication English language remains not only official but medium of instruction, citizen therefore can by accident or natural forces become bilingual or multilinguals.

The Need for Policy and Strategic Rethinking Mother Tongue as Language of Instruction

The need to decide and implement the policy statement on teaching the children in their mother tongue is highly required if only to develop and educate the citizens of this country. The state of confusion into which the non commitment and insincerity in the policy and its implementation can only be removed by squarely adapting mother tongue or language of immediate environment as medium of instruction.

Teaching in mother tongue has been identified to be of significance and relevance in the educating and all round development of the child. Husasi (2010) has this to say:

Every language spoken in this world represents a special culture, melody, colour and asst to everyman. The mother tongue is certainly one of the most precious treasures in our lives” (pp. 76)

So the dare need to be preserved and transmit from one generation to another.

Nelson Mandela has been quoted widely saying that if you talk to the man the language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his mother tongue that goes to his heart. Hence, the importance of mother tongue in education is enormous:

1. It helps in emotional and mental growth of the child
2. It impacts on the formation of the individual by shaping thoughts and emotions.
3. Psychological and personality development depends on what is conveyed through mother tongue.
4. Child’s understanding of his environment and beyond, learning of concepts and skills in addition to his perception of his existence and formation of his world view starts with the language he has first heard and taught.
5. With mother tongue, the child expresses his first feelings, his happiness, fears and his first words.

6. With first language (mother tongue, the child frames his thinking, emotions and spiritual world.
7. With it, the child establishes strong bond between his mother/teacher and himself by virtue of love, compassion, body language, verbal language and security.
8. Talking and talked to in mother tongue connect mind, heart and the brain.
9. Mother tongue is a conduit through which personality characteristics, modesty, shyness skills and creativity are revealed because when sounds go to the ears, meaning goes to the heart which gives trust and confidence in the person.
10. It is with the mother tongue that the child gets his cultural identity, expresses his cultural materials and these are what transmits from one generation to another. If not taught, then the identity is lost.
11. Mother tongue provides basis for learning. A child who comes to school with a strong foundation in his mother tongue can develop a stronger linguistic ability in the language used in the school.
12. Ability to converse in a language is developed through mother tongue where the child does not know his mother tongue – vocabulary and expression – he will prefer to use the taught language other than mother tongue, hence the beginning of cultural disconnect.
13. Mother tongue promotes love, motivation and courage to learning.

World Practices with Medium of Instruction

It is for these benefits of mother tongue which are not exhausted here that most countries of the world decide to become bilingual or multilinguals through their educational practices. Bilingual or multilingual education may involve the use of more than one language in instruction.

Citing different countries of the world that practice such policies and strategies may perhaps assist the stakeholder to rethink on specific early child care education and development in respect of medium of instruction. The present situation lacks direct guidelines as to the implementation of the language of instruction policy (though insincere and contradictory) by the teachers. Everything is left to the mercy of schools and of course the teachers. Public and Private schools are done differently. Uniformity is not available in the operation of the policy. In fact the private schools do not even think of using mother tongue as medium of instructions. There is no private school in Sokoto that uses Hausa as medium of instruction in the 3 years Nursery programme and 6 years primary education. What is happening in Global

Kids Academy, Sokoto cuts across all private schools in Sokoto. The school curriculum content for Nursery classes 2015/2016 session is as followed:

- Mathematics
- Handwriting (in English)
- General knowledge
- Colour and Rhyme
- English language
- Phonics (English sounds)

But glancing into the other countries of the world we may have a decision to take. In Africa, we can cite:

- Tanzania uses Swahili in primary and Adult education classes. But English in Secondary Schools and the Universities.
- Zimbabwe uses Shona Ndebele up to Primary 4 and English is used from primary 5 upwards.
- South Africa uses Home language up to grade 3 but English from grade 4 upwards and minority groups were allowed to use Afrikana, but all students must learn 2 languages as subjects i.e. One Home language and IsiZulu,
- In the Americas, we can cite Brazil for its uniformity with other states. Brazilian's Portuguese is the medium of instruction. There is no provisions prohibiting using other languages in Brazil. So English, German, Italian, French are used but English; Spanish are a most at least 1–2 lesson per week.
- In Canada, all schools at all levels use English or French with French dominantly in Quebec state. Official language is not used as Medium of Instruction but it is a must at Primary schools, and optional at Secondary Schools. English is used in all public and private schools with French as emersion and so many local languages are taught as subjects.
- In USA, American English is used. Spanish, French and local native languages are taught.
- Coming to Asia, China uses Mandarin in most schools. Local Mongolian Tibet and Korean are also in use.
- Hong Kong uses English or Cantonese at Primary and Secondary and English at tertiary level. There parallel schools marked as English Major Institutions (EMI) using English and Cantonese Major Institutions (CMI) using Cantonese.

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- Israel use Hebrew through from elementary to tertiary levels. Minority population (Arabs) are allowed to use Arabic at elementary and Secondary level but Hebrew at tertiary level.
 - India uses English and Hindu as state official language. English is used by private schools in instruction but public schools use both English and Hindu at Primary and Secondary levels. English is the medium of Instruction at University and Colleges level. However, regions and states are free to language of immediate environment mother tongue as medium e.g.
 - Assam uses Assamese and English
 - Western Bengal uses Bengali and English
 - Karnataka uses Kannada and English
 - Maharashtra uses Marathi and English
 - Andhra Pradesh uses Teleigu and English
 - Telangana uses Telugu, Urdu, Hindu and English
 - Tamil nadu uses Tamil and English
 - Kerela uses Matayalanu and English
 - Odisha uses Odia and English
 - In Japan, Japanese is used as medium and English as subject. So also Korea where Korean language is medium and English is subject.
 - Pakistan uses Urdu at Public schools and English at Private schools. In all schools English is the medium of instruction in Science and Mathematics.
 - Taiwan adapts Mandarin in local schools with English being compulsory in English related courses – Mathematics and Sciences.
 - Azerbaijan uses Azeri language in primary schools, Russian is introduced in Secondary school and English in tertiary institutions.
 - Georgia uses Georgian and Armenian in Secondary Schools. English is a subject. But Bangaladash use Bengali and English.

These are just cited as an example. It does not cover the world but may be enough an evidence that bilingual or multilingual education is practiceable in Nigerian situation. The number of different languages in this country is not up to what is there in India, but each and every state/region is given free hand to use its native and major community languages to instruct in schools. English is only studied is subject.

Language Policy Implementation

The Nigerian language policy has stipulated clearly that mother tongue or language of immediate environment shall be used to teach the children in the four years of basic

education i.e. Kindegattern or Early childhood classes and the first three years of primary education. But there has never been a clear direction or guidelines on how this can be implement. Everything is left to the mercy of teachers and the schools. This has led to the serious disparity in the operation of the policy in private and public schools.

Ogoamaka (2011) has conducted a research on the implementation of Mother tongue as medium of instruction in the language policy and came out with the following findings:

- No government guidelines for implementation of mother tongue policy.
- No supply of Curriculum materials for mother tongue instruction.
- No specialized teachers were trained for mother tongue instruction
- English not mother tongue is used as medium of instruction in pre-primary 1 – 3 and primary 4 – 6.
- Mother tongue is not taught as a subject in Primary 4 – 6 but
- English is being taught as a subject in pre-primary, primary 1 – 3 and primary 4 – 6.
- No significant difference in Urban and rural in implementation – the practice is uniform.
- There is confusion between home and school communication.
- All over, needed textbooks, aids and teachers are lacking and this constrain the implementation process.
- Ralph (2009), working on Primary Education and the problem of Medium Transition on Nigeria identified the following as the problem bedeviling the implantation of the policy: viz
- The phrase “at a later stage” has not been clarified as to how much later the English language replaces the child’s mother tongue as medium of instruction. Is it at primary 2, 3, or when?
- Language of immediate community has not been defined as to whether the policy refers to the language which is mutually intelligible with the child’s mother longue or which?
- Other languages of immediate community have not been codified, elaborated and popularized. Thus there is a total neglect of the development of appropriate Nigerian language for early childhood and primary education.
- Contradictions in the constitution on language policy issue have also added to the problem. Section 53 states that the business of National Assembly shall be conducted not only in English but also in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. This can

only happen “when adequate arrangements have been made”. This collides with section 97 which states that the business of the house can be conducted in English and “may” also be conducted in one or more languages that house “may” by resolution approve. This means that unless and until the house resolves and approves the usage of any Nigerian languages in the conduct of its business, we cannot have adequate arrangement for its usage and so also in our schools for instruction.

- The earlier this is done the better, for the benefits of peace and national development. Learning one language in addition to ones mother tongue is of benefit to self and the nation. It opens a new window in child’s world view. It makes him more aware, open minded, respectful to other cultures, lifestyles, customs and beliefs, and these are ingredients for peace and peaceful living.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The importance of language in delivery of knowledge, skill training and character training and up bringing cannot be over emphasised. Nigeria as a nation has recognized the significant role of language in education and has prepared not to detach the child completely from home by deciding to use his (the child) mother tongue to instruct him in the school.

The decision has been facing lots of problem, ranging from lack of clarity, direction, support and enabling intervention to lack of sincerity and commitment on the part of the stakeholders – Government, and schools.

This attitude posits Nigerian educational system inadequately preparing the citizen for peaceful living amongst themselves and by implication for sustainable development. The author is of the view that lack of basic knowledge of both mother tongue and languages of immediate communities is a sign of Nigeria’s educational system is fading and threatens her identity and security because when people do not have confidence in the education, the cohesion erodes.

The educational basis of this country is weak by neglecting bilingualism to the background. The nation’s peace, stability and economic features are threatened. The physical safety, ability to protect self and national sense of unity are equally threatened. A situation where citizens do not understand each other except in one imposed language and where one party does not know the language, problem of suspicion, mistrust and of course hatred crop in peace and stability can definitely be absent.

For sake of educational productivity, sustainable peace and national development, the nation needs a sound basic education for her citizens. Knowledge, wisdom, skills, creativity and character can only be transmitted and fostered through language that is understandable to the child. This brings in the significant role of mother tongue. Nigeria has recognized this and enshrined the idea in the national policy on education. In the absence of clear direction and guidelines for implementation of the policy, this paper suggests the strategic steps to be taken thus:

1. At the first 4 years of the basic education level, oral fluency in mother tongue should be built. Mother tongue here meaning first language of the children L1. The medium of instruction should be the L1.
2. At first three years of primary education, the steps should be:
3. Continue building of fluency in oral language of L1 in primary one (1). Reading and Writing skills should be introduced here. Towards the end of primary one, second language (L2) as subject should be introduced, L1 is still the medium of instruction.
4. Continue oral and written work in L1 at primary two. Reading and writing in L2 can be introduced here. Spelling work in L3 with reading and writing L3 can commence here two. Still, L1 is the medium of instruction.
5. Continue Oral, written work in L1, Reading and Writing in L2, spelling, reading and writing in L3 with L1 as medium of instruction.
6. At primary four, medium of instruction can still be L1 and later towards the end of primary 5, it can be switched to L2. Work on skills in L3 can proceed to primary 5 – 6 as subject. This strategy is in tabular form for easy check.

Steps	Nursery 1 - 3	Primary 1	Primary 2	Primary3	4, 5, 6.
Step 1	Oral fluency L1 (MT)	Oral fluency in L1 continued	Oral work L1 continued. Begin Reading and Writing in L2 subject.	Oral work written work L1 and L2 in L1 continued	
Step 2		Begin Reading, Writing L1	Begin Spelling, Reading, Writing in L3	Continues in primary 2	
Step 3		Begin L2 as a subject			

Step 4	Medium of Instruction is L1	of	Medium of Instruction is L1	of	Medium of Instruction is L1		L1 + L3
L1	=	Mother tongue,	L2	=	English,	L3	= Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba

The teacher's task in operating the strategy are:

1. Making the learner's to love it by motivating and encouraging them to use the language.
2. Inducing the learners to use their mother tongue at home and second language outside the home.
3. Describing the time for reading and writing in mother tongue until the learners becomes independent.
4. Telling stories and discussing interest topics in mother tongue.
5. Having books and other materials at homes and school.
6. Providing reward to the learning competitions.
7. Making the learners to listen to songs in mother tongue.
8. Providing other contextual opportunities to use mother tongue.
9. Knowing as teachers their expectations in regard to mother tongue and their learners.

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