

THE CONTRIBUTION OF MOTHER TONGUE IN SHAPING EDUCATIONAL STANDARD

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Abstract

This paper discussed the role of the mother tongue in education, background to the study, culture as it is directly related to language and society, language policy on education in Nigeria and the role of mother tongue in L2 learning. The paper adopted the library-based methodology of data collection and descriptive analysis. The paper hinges Vygotsky's "social interaction" theoretical framework which up hold that children's cognitive development is reinforced if they learn through the mother tongue in their environment. Findings of this show that: a. educational and psychological researches proved that children learn better through their mother tongue, b. children perform better academically if they are taught in their mother tongue and c. children respect their culture and norms of their society better if they learn through their mother tongue. mother tongue is the identity and language of every nation as the basis of creation of its culture and the first language of every child after birth. Studies show that children who developed solid foundation in their mother tongue also develop higher literacy abilities. Learning through the mother tongue is the right of every child and intellectual development of children is strongly linked with learning in their mother tongue. up hold that children's cognitive development is reinforced if they learn through the mother tongue in their environment. This paper calls on education authorities, schools, parents, communities' non-governmental organizations teachers and concerned individuals to ensure the continuous use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in our schools for better academic achievement of our children especially in Nigeria.

Key words; Contribution, Mother Tongue, Shaping, Educational Standard

1. Background

Language is the basic and fundamental tool of communication and that empowers human communication places man above other animals. Language is also viewed as an institution whereby human beings communicate ideas, emotion and desires and interact with each other by means of habitually oral, auditory and arbitrary symbols (Block, (5), and Sapir, (8). The central aim of this paper is to discuss the role of the mother tongue in education while the specific

objectives are: a. to discuss the background to the study, b. to discuss the concept of culture c. to discuss language policy on education in Nigeria and d. to discuss the role of the mother tongue in L₂ learning. February 21st of every year is set aside to mark or to celebrate mother tongue day by the UN organ UNESCO (United Nation Educational, Scientific and cultural organization). In the same vein, UNESCO (2025) asserts that there are about six hundred and twenty-five (625) indigenous languages in Nigeria. Form the above figure, twenty-nine (29) languages are endangered. Plan is under way according UNESCO, to preserve some Nigerian indigenous languages to save them from extinction. On 21stFebruary 2025, there was a serious protest in Bangladesh against the use of foreign language. During the protest, people demand the return of their mother tongue as the national language especially in education. This signifies the importance of mother tongue globally.

Mother tongue education became a political, pedagogical, and linguistic issue when formative education became in principle universally available to every citizen and formalized education came under the centralized control of the state in the modern period. It came then to refer restrictively to minority language education inclusive of minorities of endemic and migrant languages. The issue of mother tongue education came to the forefront during decolonization after World War 11 when the newly independent nations gave a new political and educational role to their native languages and when they formulated new policies about language use in education. The tendency of the new states was to give primacy to the mother tongue of the majority in education, and to designate it as the national language. The mother tongues of minorities who were weak not just numerically, but politically and economically, too, were given a marginal place, or none at all, in education.

United Nations recommended in 1951 the favouring of mother tongue education for all linguistic communities through a UNESCO report that drew on the experience and research findings of experts and on its declaration of human rights, which proclaimed in 1948 that “everyone is entitled to all rights and freedoms... without distinction of any kind such as... Language” (Article 2). This report, called the use of Vernacular Languages in Education (UNESCO, 1953), is the basis of subsequent developments in educational policy and programs in mother tongue education around the world. The aim of this paper is to discuss the role of the mother tongue in education. The tendency of the new states was to give primacy to the mother tongue of the majority in education, and to designate it as the national language. The mother tongues of minorities, who were weak not just numerically, but politically and economically, too, were given a marginal place, or none at all, in education.

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This reiteration draws its support for the earlier position on the use of mother tongue in education from various subsequent United Nations declarations and conventions such as convention against Discrimination in Education (1960, Article 5), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966, Article 9), Declaration of the Human Rights (of those) who are not Nationals of the Country in which they live (1985, Article 5), ILO Convention 169 Concerning Indigenous and Tribal People in Independent Countries (1989, Article 28), Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, Article 29), International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990, article 45), Declaration on the Right of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious Minorities (1992, Article 4), Declaration on Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy (1995, Article 19), and Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001, article 6). All these documents sanction the right to learn and use one’s mother tongue and, when combined with the right to education, cover the right to learn the mother tongue in schools and use it there. This recommendation made in different civil contexts shows that there is continuity in the international support for mother tongue education over half a century. There are, however, hedges and loopholes in the language of the recommendation to use mother tongue in education, which give enough room for states to procrastinate (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson, 1994: 71-110).

2. Mother Tongue

The notion of mother tongue is the identity and language of every nation as the basis of creation of its culture. Presently, many countries pay more attention to their own languages and also try to make their languages available to other people of the world. This can be done through education, politics, business and technology. Many countries try to control their people’s mind through their language (MT) and integrate them into their culture. There has been several research going on around the world on the importance of mother tongue to preserve languages and cultures. Mother tongue, (first language, Li or native language) is of paramount significance for learning as part of intellectual development of children and their cognitive ability. Mother tongue which is the

language children acquire from birth, helps the child's mental, moral and emotional development. Research shows that language delays observed in deaf children caused delays in their main aspects of cognitive development. Children who cannot understand complex syntactic forms like complements, have difficulty in understanding how their own thoughts and beliefs differ from those around them. Similarly, much of children's future social and intellectual development hinges on the milestone of mother tongue. Therefore, mother tongue plays a significant and central role in children's education which requires cognitive development according to (Plessis, 25) Schick and (Hoffmeister, 25) as cited in (Noormohamadi, 25).

Mother tongue is the child's first language after birth it is the first language the child listens and hears from his mother even from her womb and later it is developed from people the child hears and listens close and around him or her. This is the child's native language right from birth from the mother and it is the language the child uses to build relationship with the family (Faridy and Syaodih, 194) as cited in (Saeed 37). The importance of mother tongue to children include their language, personal, social and cultural features. The choice of words and expressions differs from one culture to another because asking questions directly in one language is considered a taboo and curious in another language. This is so because language choice in conversation is well thought ahead of its conveyance. The meaning of language becomes broader since it is not only spoken, but also the child is able to create his or her own personality, social communications, culture and identity through language (Effiong, 141) as cited Saeed.

Studies show that children who developed solid foundation in their mother tongue also develop higher literacy abilities. This indicates the importance of mother tongue for children's social and educational development. Children whose parent spend time telling them stories and develop mother tongue vocabularies and concepts, such children come to school well prepared and succeed educationally according to (Baker, 2000 and Cummins, 2000), as cited in (Noormohamad, 26).

Food and agricultural organization of the United Nation (FAO) (5) asserts that intellectual development of children is strongly linked to the language they speak; if they are taught in their mother tongue, their intelligence develops. Additionally, when children learn through their mother tongue, they learn concepts and intellectual skills that are relevant to their ability to function in their entire life. According to UNESCO (United nations Educational, scientific and cultural organization), observed that "learning in mother tongue has cognitive and emotional value". (Krishnaji, 1990) argued that several psychological, social and educational experiments proved that learning through mother tongue is deeper, faster and effective. Teaching students in the classroom through their mother tongue i.e subject, content, the students' cognitive skills would be developed. Furthermore, teaching concepts in the mother tongue, students would be expose to comprehensible input and enable them to develop socially, educationally, culturally and

emotionally (Dumatog and Dekker, 2003) as cited in (Noormohamadi, 26). (Saeed, 2021) conducted a research on “the role of mother tongue in early childhood education” using one primary school which Kurds mother tongue is the language of instruction while in the other primary school English is the language of instruction. Saeed found that children in the school that are taught in mother tongue understand school subjects and perform academically better than those taught in English. Additionally, he also found that the children in the primary school which use Kurdish language as means of instruction are more adhered to the Kurdish cultural practices than those in the primary school that use English as medium of instruction.

3. Culture

Culture has been described as a complex phenomenon. It refers to the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of particular country or group of people. Culture is mainly concern about what a person learns for a period which include information, facts and values that enables the person to actively participate in his family and community surroundings (kwsh, 25) as cited in (Saeed). Similarly, (Taylor, 1974), argued that culture is a comprehensive concept that comprises the knowledge, art, law, traditions and morals that a person receives as part of his society (Bennett, 2015). Furthermore, culture is holistically viewed as an integrated system of all ideas, ideals, beliefs, arts, customs, moralities, laws, skills, methods of atonement, heritage, ways of life and means of communication. Culture is also considered to mean several customs in a specific area which is accepted by the majority of people in the society according to (American Heritage, Science Dictionary, 2005).

Some scholars consider culture as a human process of growth, transformation, expansion, prosperity through creation and production. This includes beliefs, art, ethics, law and all the capabilities and habits that one acquires as part of the community. (Kwsh, 2010, p. 36). Culture is viewed in another perspective as a system of behaviours and modes. It has direct relationship with language and beliefs that the perception of one on the other. Language is the mirror of society and reflects the elements of the culture of that society (Mahadi and Jafari, 2012, p. 231).

4. Language Policy on Education in Nigeria

The language of instruction in multilingual Nigeria has always been a matter of concern to educators and educational planners. (Ouadaogo, 2000) asserts that, “education and language issues are very complex in Africa because of the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual situations”. Due to this linguistic plurality, the government appreciated the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion as well as preserving culture. Thus, there was the need for language policy, planning and development as well as implementation. In 1977, an official document titled national policy, on education was promulgated which was revised in 1981,

1998 and 2004. This document assigned different functions to the many Nigerian languages in the nation's education at various levels. The policy stated that every child shall learn in the language of the immediate environment in the first three years while English language shall be taught as a school subject. However, in the interest of national unity among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, every child shall require to learn one of the three national languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba). The provision of the NPE (2004). Section 4, paragraph 19 (e) and (f) cited below confirms that the multilingual education is in existence:

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. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as a subjects.

The policy made it explicit that from the fourth year of basic education, the medium of instruction shall be English language while the language of the immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects. At secondary school level, English shall be the language of instruction while the language of the immediate environment, of the three major Nigerian language (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) other than that of the immediate environment and French shall be taught as school subjects according to (Olagbaju,).

5. The Role of the Mother Tongue in Education

Education is the process of teaching, training and learning especially in schools and colleges to improve knowledge and develop skills. Education is a potential instrument for encouraging independent thinking among the learners. Students should be allowed and encourage to come up with their own opinions and interpretation of events around them. Studies show that children who come to school with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop strong literacy skills. This research is clear about the importance of children's mother tongue for their personal and educational development. If parent spend time with their children and tell them stories or discuss issues with them in a way that develops their mother tongue vocabularies and concepts, children come to school well prepared and succeed educationally (Becker, 2000).

UNESCO (1953), emphasized that children need to be educated in their mother tongue, especially in their early education. This means that UNESCO fully supports the idea that children should be educated especially at their early years in their mother tongue. FAO (2002) argued that the intellectual development of children is very much linked to the language they speak; if they are taught in their mother tongue, their intelligence develops. Moreover, several psychological studies and educational experiments proved that learning through mother tongue is deeper, faster and effective. In fact, using students' mother tongue in the classroom to teach subjects, the students'

cognitive skills would develop. Additionally, by teaching concepts in the mother tongue, students would be exposed to comprehensible input and enable them to develop academically (Krishnaji, 1990, Dumatog and Dekker, 2003).

6. The Role of the Mother Tongue in L₂ Learning

It is argued that incomplete first language (MT) Skills often make learning other languages (L₂) difficult. Cummins (2000) observed that the level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language (L₂) development, if the mother tongue is promoted, the concepts and literacy skills can be transferred to second language learning. Furthermore, a high correlation between learning to read in mother tongue and subsequent reading achievement in second language (L₂) has been found. In fact, supporting the development of the mother tongue enhances the development of the second language (L₂) learning according to (Koda, 2005) as cited in (Noormohamadi, 26).

7. Research Methodology

This study employed library based secondary sources of data collection. The researcher considers the choice of this method suitable and applicable to the study. The secondary sources of data were derived from the existing literature which include: books/texts, journals, academic articles, online sources and other relevant materials to the study. The data collected from these sources was analysed by using the descriptive method which the researcher consider suitable to the present study.

8. Theoretical Framework

This paper hinges on Vygotsky's theory of social interaction which uphold that children think and learn better through the interaction of their parents' language (mother tongue) in the immediate environment. Vygotsky's major theme of theoretical framework is that "social interaction" plays a fundamental role in the child development of cognition. Child's cognitive development requires social interaction and any function of individual's development requires social interaction and any function of individual's development as a result of his or her culture. Child's cognitive development has two phases. First, it appears between people as an inter-psychological category, and then within the child as an intra-psychological category (Vygotsky) as cited in cook and cook, (194).

Children's culture in Vygotsky's words has two contributions to the child's intellectual development. First, children acquire much of their thinking (knowledge) from it. Secondly, children acquire the means of their thinking (tools of intellectual adaptation (language or MT) from the surrounding culture. The child's cognitive development is viewed as a dialectical process

where the child learns through shared problem solving experience with someone else like parent, teacher, siblings or a peer. Zone of proximal development in Vygotsky's theory means, "the distance between the actual level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with a more capable peer" Vygotsky, (86). In 1976, Wood, Bruner and Rose invented the term "scaffolding" to describe tutorial between an adult and a child. Adult or parent transmit to children the rich body of culture through their speech. Then the child's own language (MT), as a learning process, comes to help his or her intellectual development according to Vygotsky. Moreover, apart from its communicative function, language has a guiding regulating function and the direction of one's own behaviour develops. In Vygotsky's account, child logic develops only along with the growth of the child's social speech and whole experience. Through social interaction within the socio-cultural environment, the child develops into more sophisticated and effective mental process called "higher mental functions". In summary, the implication of Vygotsky's theory is that social interaction and in fact mother tongue plays more significant role in the development of children's thinking and learning than that of Piaget's theory according to Wood (27).

9. Conclusion

The mother tongue has been described as an identity of an individual and the nation as a whole. It is the first language that we acquire from birth and part of our cultural heritage; our totality of life. Mother tongue is vital to our personality, social and cultural features. The choice of words differs from one language to another. Culture and language co-exist and determine the personality of an individual. Studies show that children who developed solid foundation in their mother tongue also develop higher literacy skills, social and educational development. United Nations formulation described mother tongue as the human rights of individuals especially the minority. The intellectual development of children is linked to the language they speak and affirms that if they are taught in their mother tongue, their intelligence develops. Theories of children's cognitive development confirmed that children learn better, faster and develop higher cognitive through their mother tongue. Countries which adopt their mother tongue as language of education developed more than those countries that adopt another language in their education system other than their mother tongue. Findings of this paper show that: a. educational and psychological researches proved that children learn better through their mother tongue, b. children perform academically better if they are taught in their mother tongue and c. children respect their culture and norms of their society better if they learn through their mother tongue.

10. Recommendations

The role that the mother tongue plays in the education process of children is extremely crucial. It supports the progress of a child's awareness in terms of personal, social, and cultural matters. Speaking the native language is helpful to increase critical way of thinking skills as well as the ability to write and read more critically. Supplying comfortable environments for the students is of great importance as well. When children are taught in that language used by their families at home, they can progress their self-esteem and confidence to build social bounds. That is why UNESCO and several other studies have emphasized the need for children everywhere in the world to have studied in their own language, especially in early childhood education. It is especially important that:

- i. Early childhood education should be practiced in the mother tongue.
- ii. Education policies should recognize the importance of the mother tongue learning not another language.
- iii. Encourage parents to send their children to schools in their mother tongue.
- iv. Government policy and the education system should be given more prominence in the development of schools in the mother tongue.

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