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MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION: A PANACEA TO
EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH IN
NIGERIA PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The controversy as to whether the English Language or the child's mother tongue facilitates teaching and learning at primary school level has not been resolved. The advocates of mother-tongue medium claim that it makes for meaningful teaching and learning and better pupils' participation in the learning process while antagonists of MT- medium claim it hinders effective teaching and learning of the English language. The study therefore investigated the impact of the MT Education on effective teaching and learning of English in selected primary schools in Anambra and Enugu States of Nigeria using survey research design. Three research questions were raised and answered. Data were collected through the use of teachers' questionnaire. Findings revealed that primary school teachers were aware of MT policy provision and that it facilitates effective teaching and learning of the English Language at primary schools. Consequently, recommendations were made that pupils should be given the opportunity of learning in MT longer than the first three years of primary education while government should ensure regular monitoring of classroom practices to ensure compliance with MT policy provision.

Key words: Mother Tongue (MT), National Policy on Education, Language Policy.

INTRODUCTION

The question of the language of instruction in schools is a very crucial one and often controversial in many parts of the world especially in developing countries. It is even more complex in previously colonized multilingual countries where the official colonial language is different from the indigenous languages. The education sector is one of the areas that share in the crisis of language choice. Ouadraogo (2000, p. 89) cited in Owu-Ewie (2006, p.12) noted that education and language issues are very complex in Africa because of the multi-ethnic and multilingual situation. English, the official language in Nigeria, is used extensively in the print and electronic media, in the judiciary, police, the armed forces, legislature, in commerce and in politics. In education, it is the medium of instruction from the upper primary to the tertiary levels, in pursuance of Nigeria educational goals, government had put in place a language policy guideline for primary education among others in the National Policy on Education (NPE) as follows:

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment (mother tongue) 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 subjects (NPE 2004, Section 4, No 19 e and f)

This provision simply implies that at the lower primary school (i.e. primary 1-3), the medium of instruction for all subjects shall be the mother tongue (MT) but in the upper primary school (i.e. primary 4-6), the medium of instruction shall be the English language. Research evidence also tended to show that adequate training in the MT-medium is not in conflict with adequate training in the non- MT-medium such as English (Awoniyi 1974, p. 21). This paper, therefore, examined how the indigenous language education policy implementation has affected the teaching and learning of the English language in the upper primary school.

One of the linguistic problems of public interest in education is the use of foreign language in teaching. But, it is generally accepted that in teaching and learning process, the MT of the learner is of utmost importance. MT education is the idea that a learner is taught the fundamental concepts of a topic in familiar first language. Once the concepts are learnt, they can easily be reapplied to an L2 education stream. Awoniyi (1974, p. 22) defined mother tongue (MT) as the language which a group of people considered to be inhabitants of an area acquired in the early years and which eventually become their natural instrument of thoughts and communication. MT is the first language that a person learnt. Thus, a person may be described as a native speaker of the first language, although he/she may

also be a native speaker of more than one language if all of the languages were learnt without formal education, such as through cultural immersion before puberty (Wikipedia, 2004).

For one thing, MT categorizes a large part of the child's environment, that is, it has names for most of the objects, actions, ideas, attributes and so on that are so important to him and society. David (2008, p.10) noted that the MT is the child's environment and is also the natural basis on which verbal skills can be built.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The implementation of Mother Tongue (MT) policy in the Nigerian primary school is aimed at developing the LI skills and enhancing the learning potentials of the Nigerian child. However, there are controversies as to the extent to which the indigenous language education has contributed to the effective teaching and learning of the English language. To this end, this study examined the impacts of the use of indigenous languages in the lower primary school on the effective teaching and learning of the English language at the upper primary school.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. Are teachers in the upper primary class aware of the MT policy on primary education?
2. What is the impact of the use of MT in the lower primary school on the teaching and learning of the English language in the upper primary school?
3. Does government or its agencies monitor the implementation of language policy in the primary school?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study investigated the impacts of the use of indigenous language in the lower primary school on the teaching and learning of the English language in the senior primary school in Nigeria.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant in many respects in that it would confirm the desirability or otherwise of the continued use of indigenous languages in early childhood education. Also, the study would confirm if truly the adoption of indigenous languages in early childhood education would hinder effective learning of English as it is widely believed by parents and the entire society.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design that employed questionnaire and face-to-face interview to collect data. The sample for the study was drawn from ten randomly selected primary schools in Onitsha metropolis in Anambra State. Teachers in the upper primary schools were randomly selected and studied because they teach learners who have supposedly passed through the mother tongue medium classes. In all, 50 teachers were studied under normal school setting. School heads of the selected schools were also interviewed face-to-face on the implementation of the MT policy at both levels and the implication for the English language teaching and learning. Analysis of data was by frequency counts and simple percentages.

RESULTS

Findings from the investigations that sought answers to the research questions have been provided and tabulated as presented below:

Research Question 1: Are primary school teachers aware of MT Policy Provision?

Table 1: Primary School Teachers Awareness of MT Policy Provision

I am aware of the MT policy for the early primary school				Total
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
2 2.0%	2 2.0%	31 31.0%	15 15.0%	50 50.0%
-	-	22 22.0%	28 28.0%	50 50.0%
2 20%	2 2.0%	53 3.0%	43 43.0%	100 100.0%

From Table 1, it could be found that 53% of teachers "agree" that they are aware of the MT policy on primary school language policy, while 43% of them "strongly agree" on their awareness of the policy. Only 2%, respectively, "disagree" and "strongly disagree" on their awareness of the policy.

Research Question 2: Impact of MT Education on English Language Instruction

Table 2: Impact of MT Education on the learning of English language

		The MT language skills acquired in the lower primary is of great help in pupils learning of the English language				Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Anambra State	Count % of Total	6 12.0%	29 58.0%	15 30.0%		50 100.0%
		Pupils who were taught in the MT do not find it difficult to learn and use the English Language				Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Anambra State	Count % of Total	5 10.0%	15 30.0%	22 44.0%	8 16.0%	50 100.0%
		MT implementation in the lower level is negatively affecting the teaching of the English language at the upper level				Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Anambra State	Count % of Total	14 28.0%	23 46.0%	12 24.0%	1 2.0%	50 100.0%
		MT implementation in the lower level is negatively affecting the learning of the English language at the upper level				Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Anambra State	Count % of Total	15 30.0%	19 38.0%	14 28.0%	2 4.0%	50 100.0%
		I sometimes explain lessons in MT before pupils understand				Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Anambra State	Count % of Total	1 2.0%	7 14.0%	28 56.0%	14 26.0%	50 100.0%

		Pupils score highly in the English language as a result of MT foundation				Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Anambra State	Count % of Total		6 12.0%	25 50.0%	19 38.0%	50 100.0%

From table 2, 24% "disagree" and 21% "strongly agree", with the fact that MT positively affects the learning of English. However, 6% of them "strongly disagree". On whether MT implementation at the lower level negatively affects the teaching of English, 46% of respondents marked "disagree", 31% marked "strongly disagree", 19% marked "agree" and 4% marked "strongly agree". 48% of respondents "disagree" MT implementation is negatively affecting the learning of English language and 25% "strongly disagree" with that. 20% of respondents "agree" while 18% "strongly agree" with that, 49% of respondents "agree" they sometimes explain lessons in MT before pupils understand, while 28% "strongly agree". Only 16% "disagree" and 7% "strongly disagree" with that. On whether pupils score highly in the English language as a result of MT foundation, 51% "agree", 29% "strongly agree", 14% "disagree" and 6% "strongly disagree".

Research Question 3: Does Government agencies monitor the implementation of MT Provision in NPE 2004

Table 3: Monitoring of Implementation of MT Provision

		Government agencies visit your school to monitor the implementation of MT policy				Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Anambra State	Count % of Total	14 14.0%	29 29.0%	6 6.0%	1 1.0%	50 50.0%
Enugu State	Count % of Total	14 14.0%	27 27.0%	7 7.0%	2 2.0%	50 50.0%
	Count % of Total	28 28.0%	56 56.0%	13 13.0%	3 3.0%	50 100.0%

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study show that MT medium in the lower primary school enhances English language teaching and learning at the upper level class. It is strongly believed that prolonged use of LI in schools will enhance the learning of L2. Thomas and Collier (2002:13) observed that the more the number of years of primary language schooling a learner has received, the greater his/her English achievement is shown to be. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- There is need to reposition the education sector to provide mechanism for regular monitoring of language policy implementation.
- Remuneration, motivation and regular workshop should be put in place for teachers and stakeholders in education on the language policy issues to demonstrate government commitment.
- Late-exit transitional bilingual education programme that allows for a longer period of mother tongue use is recommended. This is to ensure that the child would have had enough L1 foundation to help gradual transfer to English medium. This paper proposes mother tongue use up to the 5th year in the primary school while the 6th year is used to gradually transit to the English language.
- There is need for Nigerian government to revive the National Institute for Nigerian Language (NINLAN) which activities have been hindered by lack of funding. NINLAN was established in 1993 to train teachers in Nigerian languages to forestall shortage of teachers for schools but has not really taken off.
- Government of Nigeria whose duty it is to oversee the production and provision of language textbooks and other materials to school should live up to her responsibility and create conducive language learning environment.

CONCLUSION

UNESCO (1953:37) stated that the use of LI in education is psychologically, sociologically and educationally beneficial to learners and that every effort should be made to provide education in the LI. Saville-Troike (1988:15) asserted in his study that almost in all cases, a student's relative competence in the LI coincided with the student's relative achievement in English. Therefore, a reassessment of the entire education policy to bridge the big gap between policy provision and policy implementation is a desired.

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