

The Place of Mother Tongue in Language Teaching and Learning in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examines the significance of mother tongue in language teaching and learning in Nigeria. The decline in the level of language learning as reflected in the performance of students in the primary and secondary schools across the nation is partly related to neglect of the mother tongue in language teaching and learning across board. Anchoring on Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as the theoretical framework, the researcher uses the descriptive design to showcase the fact that the mother tongue plays pivotal role in language teaching and learning in Nigeria. Consequently, the continuous neglect of the mother tongue in our primary and secondary schools in Nigeria will go a long way not only to create a disenchantment in the minds of young learners as they daily experience a disconnect between the language used in imparting knowledge and their immediate milieu because of the failure of the foreign languages to appropriately capture their daily experiences; but also to widen the gap of the constant yearning for disintegration that still bedevils the nation. The paper recommends amongst others that to overcome the challenges faced in language teaching and learning thereby solving the problems of insecurity, corruption; and hence, foster unity and patriotism that would lead to peace and development, mother tongue must be given its place of pride in language teaching and learning in Nigeria. Therefore, policy makers must begin to inculcate studies in mother tongue as part of education curriculum especially at the primary and secondary school levels which would engender a firm educational foundation for learners. It also recommends that language teachers as role models must emphasize the significant role of mother tongue in language teaching and learning. This will go a long way to stir interest and love for mother tongue in the heart of young learners.

Keywords: language, Mother Tongue, Teaching, Education

Introduction

This study, the place of mother tongue in language teaching and learning in Nigeria, examines the fact that there is a decline in the level of language learning in all the aspects of language acquisition across the country. This deteriorating state has not only affected performance in language related exercises but also hampered efficiency in other aspects of life and studies because language is life. To overcome these challenges and salvage the situation, there is the need to return to the basics which is starting from the foundation. This is anchored on the fact that there is absolutely little or nothing to be done at the top if the foundation is faulty. Consequently therefore, a return to the teaching and learning of the mother tongue is the panacea to solving the dwindling state of language learning in Nigeria.

The Concept of Language

Language like oxygen is an essential part of human existence and relevance as well as navigating compass which shapes the thinking and perception of the world around its users. The various arguments about the origin, development and nature of language notwithstanding, it is the human means of communication through which thoughts and ideas are expressed and information passed from one point to the other. In fact, in the words of Abiodun in Baba (2016), it is language that defines man's humanity. To buttress this further, Ibileye (2021) asserts that "language has been generally accepted as one of the most defining features of our humanity as Homo Sapiens which stands us out from other creatures. Consequently, language in its various forms and manifestation has remained the primary focus of linguistics as a discipline". This justifies the fact that language

is instinctively human and ranks as the most advanced form of communication. Quoting Chomsky (1986), Ibileye (2021) asserts that “language is instinctive with many parts built-in or innate, much of which is ability hard-wired into our brains by our genes”.

According to Sapir (2014) also quoted in Baba and Elegba (2022), “language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced sounds”. Likewise, Bolinger (1978) quoted in Onuigbo (2019), states that *language is a system of vocal auditory communication using conventional signs composed of arbitrary patterned sound unit and assembled according to a set of rules, interacting with experiences of the users.*

Buttressing the strength of this definition, Opega (2000) asserts that language is not a conglomeration of haphazardly composed mumble-jumble but an organized sound produced for specific purposes. He further states that every language is relevant within a context as it is meant to capture the experiences of the users within a speech community. This brings to relevance as posited in Wikipedia that language is “a system of signs encoding and decoding information which enables man to impart information, express feelings and emotions, influence the activities of others and comport himself within varying degrees of friendliness or hostility towards persons who substantially make use of the same set of organized noises (sounds).” This definition goes a long way to outline the functions of language and significant amongst these very salient roles of language, is the fact that language helps an individual not only to express feelings and emotions but also to comport himself. It therefore suggests that humans think, act and react within the context of a language. This therefore justifies the assertion that language defines humanity. It is language that exhumes our humanity and makes us functional beings.

Mazanaje (1993) quotes John Locke, a political theorist as saying that language is the greatest conduct whereby men convey their discoveries, reasoning and knowledge from one to another. Furthermore, Essien (1998) posits that “language is simply a system of structured arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings make meaning and communicate with each other in a given community”. Language is indeed a system of rules in which sound structure and meaning are integrated for communication. Adding his voice to this, Adedimeji (2005) states that language is a “system of signs, verbal or non-verbal through which humans in their various cultural milieus exchange ideas and communicate feelings”. Likewise, Aitchison (12978) as quoted in Baba (2009) affirms that “language is a patterned system of arbitrary sound symbols whose characteristic featured of displacement, cultural transmission, productivity and duality are rare or absent in animal communication”. Consequently, language is a particular system or style of human communication through the structured use of words. It is primarily a system, a symbol, an agent, an instrument and indeed a vehicle for communication.

If the position of Baba and Elegba (2022) like other scholars that language is a system of speech sounds, signs, symbols and gestures which can be used to communicate human thoughts, ideas or desires as well as the stance of Ibileye (2021) that each individual draws from the reservoir of linguistic resources of the society and deploys language based on the needs of the speech events; and thus implying according to Sapir (2014) in Saeed (2021) that “language is a culturally and biologically inherited phenomenon, hence an act of enlightenment, is of any significance in study, juxtaposing same with the position of Sapir-Wharf (1978) that the best way to colonize a people is to colonize their language, as well as the fact that language is the only creative property unique to human beings and thus the only road to thinking (Sapir: 1921); then, for total liberation and independence, decolonizing the language by giving the indigenous languages, the mother tongues their rightful place in language teaching and learning is germane to the peace, unity, security, growth and development of this country, Nigeria. Identifying this importance, Section 55 (ii) of the 1999 Constitution states that the business of the house of assembly shall be conducted in English, but the house may in addition to English conduct the business of the house in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the house may by resolution approve.

The Role of Mother Tongue in Language Teaching and Learning

Mother tongue is strategically significant in language teaching and learning worldwide. The on-going argument about developing or adopting a national language in Nigeria (Tenimu: 2020) notwithstanding. It is imperative to note that mother tongue is the identity of a nation and the language of every nation forms the foundation or basis for the creation of its culture.

Mother tongue is simply defined as the language which a person has grown up speaking from childhood. Adakonye (2021) opines that the mother tongue is the language of birth of an individual. Adding credence to this, Atodo (2022) asserts that mother tongue is the language that envelopes the norms, values, culture and tradition of a people. To him, mother tongue is the breath of the society, the cord that binds and it has the capacity to connect a user to his/her lineage or ancestral home. Rajathurai (2020) upholding the position of many scholars in asserting that *there is no difference between the mother tongue and the first language or L1 states further that the mother tongue is also called the first language, native language, native tongue, L1; the first language or dialect that a person has been exposed to from birth. This language is inbuilt in a person and from birth, the person begins to consciously about most unconsciously use the language especially since it forms a major part of the persons immediate environment.*

This definition however provokes a significant argument in the study and usage of mother tongue as it does not expatiate on the thin line that could possibly exist between the mother tongue and L1 in a multi-linguistic situation because in a multi-linguistic nation like Nigeria, some persons are born in other linguistic communities different from their place of origin and as such the first language in contact is different from their mother tongues. Consequently, they acquire a first language which is not their mother tongues and thereafter acquire their mother tongues, for those privileged to do so consciously, as their second language. Arguable however, Ejiga (2020) asserts that over 75% of Nigerians born in any part of the country have their mother tongues as their first languages. This implies therefore, that the mother tongue could be considered the first language of such population.

This paper therefore aligns with Atodo (2022) in his assertion that there are basically three levels of language acquisition namely: mother tongue which is the language of one's parents, the native tongue of an individual; the L1 which is the first language in contact and acquired unconsciously; and the L2 which is the language acquired consciously either in the society or in school. In Nigeria therefore, the English language is the L2 of over 75% of its population, (Ejiga: 2020). For instance, if Mr. Achenyo Enemali, an igala man who resides in a Yoruba dominated area in Lagos state for over twenty years and speaks Yoruba fluently gives birth and the child is constantly exposed to the Yoruba language from birth, Yoruba becomes the child's L1 (first language) which is different from the child's mother tongue, the Igala language. If, in the course of time, the family decides to introduce the child to Igala language; such becomes the child's L2 (second language) and hence, acquired consciously. Consequently, the child's acquisition of the Igala language will be affected by the first language since the first language is the foundation upon which the child began to build his/her belief system. This is the situation that plays out in the attempts by teachers and learners in a typical Nigerian environment to impact and acquire knowledge using a foreign language or any other language alien to their first language. Illustratively, a child who formed his/her belief system on the Igala language finds it difficult to learn using the English language because it is not the language with which he/she formed a bond growing up. This therefore makes teaching and learning a herculean task for the teacher and the learner respectively because in the attempt to acquire the L2, interference occurs due to the overlapping influence of the L1 and most often, the mother tongue which consciously or unconsciously resides (culturally rooted) in the language repertoire of the teacher and learner. Such interference could occur at each level of linguistic analysis namely syntax, semantic, morphology/lexical or phonology, hence, producing syntactic interference, semantics interference, morphological/lexical interference or phonological interference. For instance, a teacher or learner in the Igala linguistic milieu could literally say "John is by the ear of the road", (standard English of "John is by the side of the road" or "John is by the road side") which in

his/her mother tongue (“John d’eti ona), would be correct but unacceptable in the English language. What occurred in the instance above is called transliteration and a grievous offence in English language usage since it does not pass any comprehensive message but in the mother tongue, the expression is correct, acceptable and communicative.

According to Ejiga (2020), “humans think in their mother tongues before translating to any other language”. Thus, the speaker in the above illustration is set off balance in the bid to learn and use English language because his thoughts are formed in his mother tongue, the language with which he/she has a bond. It therefore implies that for effective and efficient teaching and learning to take place, inculcating the mother tongue as part of the process which would serve as a springboard for the acquisition of other languages will go a long way at solving the problem of interference in language teaching and learning in Nigeria. Conscious of this significant place of mother tongue in this venture, it is stated in the National Policy on Education 1999 section 97 sub session (v) that “government will see to it that the mechanism of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later state, English”. As encouraging as such provision could be, its implementation especially in many of the primary schools in Nigeria has remained a mirage.

In the opinion of Rajathuria (2020), mother tongue is valuable and vital in framing the thinking and emotions of people. Its significance in the comprehensive development of a child cannot be overemphasized especially since it associates the learner to his culture, ensures enhanced cognitive development and supports learning of other languages. By this all inclusive role, the mother tongue enhances the learner’s ability to comprehend the world around him/her. This justifies the position of Mandela in Saeed (2021) that ‘if you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head; if you talk to him in his language (mother tongue), that goes to his heart’. Consequently, a second language is learned best, when a first language is learned well. Ogude (2013) asserts that “the current practice is therefore for individuals to speak, and write in their own dialects”. This position will enhance competence not only in the mother tongue but also help boost studies in other areas.

In the words of Irina (2016), educating and teaching children (learners) in the mother tongue is the main principle at the early stage of the learning process. This is relevant as it conforms to the biblical assertion, “if the foundation be faulty, what can the righteous do?” the foundation in language learning is the mother tongue. Hence, poor acquisition or neglect of the mother tongue would go a long way to impinge teaching and learning. Thus, when a learner (child) develops in the mother tongue, he/she is simultaneously fostering a whole host of other skills such as critical thinking and literacy thinking.

Summarily, the relevance of mother tongue in language teaching and learning in Nigeria includes the following:

It helps to develop a strong foundation for learning additional language since it advances a strong basis for learning other tongues. This implies that the mother tongue provides a solid platform for multilingualism.

Mother tongue learning provides a platform for enhanced commercial activities and profit maximization. This is helpful in the drive towards entrepreneurial skills because since the mother tongue is rooted in the culture of the individual, it will create room for looking inward to discover hidden talents as well as make entrepreneurial training easier, (Ogunde: 2013).

It helps to develop and foster effective communication skills. This is because when communication is grounded in the mother tongue especially from the homes, communication outside the house especially in the workplace becomes a smooth activity and when communication is effective, the efficiency level increases thereby increasing profitability in an organization.

Mother tongue learning is fundamental in the aspect of personal life. It stimulates confidence and creates awareness of individual identity. This will go a long way to stimulate love, peace and togetherness amongst members of the family or speech community. That is, it elicits strong family ties.

The multiplier effects of being grounded in the mother tongue also trigger the creation of employment opportunities. Apart from the fact that those who have firm grip of the mother tongue would be employed into the noble profession of teaching, they could also be employed to serve as links between their society and other parts of the world.

Significantly also is the fact that mother tongue teaching and learning would prevent the threat of extinction face by indigenous languages in Nigeria. Over the years, several arguments abound regarding the fact that many languages in Africa, Nigeria inclusive, are heading for extinction. According to Ejiga (2020), “studies reveal that if nothing is urgently done, many languages in Nigeria will be extinct by the end of the 21st century.” To avert this woeful situation, emphasizing mother tongue teaching and learning is sacrosanct.

It is imperative to assert also that emphasizing mother tongue teaching and learning in Nigeria would go a long way to proffer solution to the insecurity problem in the country. This stems from the fact that language defines humanity. Mother tongue is a tie (a cord) that binds. It inculcates the spirit of patriotism and love for one another in the citizens of a country. Since language and culture are inseparable, instilling values and norms that would lead to upholding the principles of patriotism, justice, accountability, fairness, equal rights, contentment and other moral values strong enough to curtail social vices would be easy through mother tongue learning. And when these are firmly grounded, the desire to outsmart the other person, the yearning for recognition and disintegration at the detriment of the other person, the desire to kill and maim, the high rate of corruption, would be minimized. This in the long run would engender the desired peaceful coexistence, interaction and efficient relationship between the various tribes in the country and with this synergy achieved, security of lives and properties, growth and development would become possible.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that the dominance of non-mother tongue education is a great threat to language teaching and learning, hence, the security of lives and properties, peaceful coexistence, growth and development of this country, Nigeria. This is in recognition of the fact that language teaching and learning involves a systematic process of producing, reproducing and representing knowledge leading to the systematic internalizing and demonstrating of the acquired knowledge. Consequently, excelling in the all-inclusive human activity is dependent on how grounded participants (teachers and learners) are in the language. It also revealed that lack of mother tongue teaching and learning underscores pre-existing inequalities in all other aspects of our everyday life and existence. It examined the concept of language as well as the significant roles of mother tongue in language teaching and learning in Nigeria. It anchored on the fact that language is life; hence, to teach and learn life, it must be done in the language that houses such life and the language that could do such perfectly in Africa and particularly Nigeria, is the mother tongue. Sadly, it is discovered that though the government through legislations have created several platforms for the teaching and learning of mother tongue, many schools in Nigeria neither implement these policies nor make any room for mother tongues to thrive. This therefore has relegated the mother tongue to the background thereby making it a ‘sin’ when used in a formal setting instead of allowing it to develop side by side with other foreign languages.

Recommendations

Consequent on the need to immediately give the mother tongue the deserved relevance in language teaching and learning in Nigeria, the following recommendations are put forward as they would help not only to prevent mother tongues extinction in Nigeria, reduce the failure rate in the acquisition of other languages like the English language especially by learners in the primary and secondary schools in Nigeria, but it will also set the tune in our quest for security, peace, growth and development in the country. In fact, encouraging the teaching and learning of the mother tongue would help in solving the problem facing the country in the bid to adopt and develop a national language.

To improve the quality of education, language policies need to take into account mother tongue teaching and learning since it could make learning productive, effective and positive. This therefore calls for the inclusion of mother tongue as part of the national curriculum for our schools especially at the primary and junior secondary school levels. While some institutions already have such, making it a policy will make everyone key in thereby expanding the horizon.

Policy managers must go beyond the level of policy formulation to implementation. The norms/tradition of dumping policy documents in cabinets without implementation or monitoring to ensure compliance must be discouraged by all and sundry. Government agencies, heads of institutions and other well-meaning Nigerians must begin to ensure that formulated policies are implemented holistically.

Also, all stakeholders should support effective teaching as regards mother tongue teaching and learning in schools. The government and other financially buoyant organizations and individuals should provide scholarships and training funds for scholars who specialize or wish to further their studies in the mother tongue as well as research in mother tongue related ventures. This will encourage linguists to go for further studies and carry out researches. So, training and developing teachers as well as developing researchers in the mother tongue is significant now more than ever.

Parents, teachers and institution of learning should support and provide early childhood education in mother tongue.

Finally, the learner has to develop a robust interest in mother tongue learning and make frantic efforts not only at acquiring it but also sufficient proficiency in the mother tongue because it will aid performance in language related studies as well as other aspects of study since the mother tongue has a significant place in language teaching and learning.

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