Issues, Problems and Prospects of Mother Tongue Education in Nigeria

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This paper explores issues involved in the use of Nigerian indigenous languages for the whole duration of primary education in Nigeria. It provides a theoretical framework which shows that language choices are never made in a vacuum; rather they are influenced by a plethora of factors, including the purely educational and linguistic, which are often overwhelmed by political, social and economic expediencies. The paper then looks at the pros and cons of mother tongue education and concludes that MTE, desirable as it is, should not be implemented without taking care of such important issues as ensuring the readiness of Nigerian languages for education through language development and standardization, training of teachers and materials development as well as ensuring positive attitudes to learning in those languages by parents and their children.

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the use of Nigerian indigenous languages as medium of instruction for the whole duration of primary education. The language of instruction is very crucial to education at every level because, to a reasonable extent, it serves as the key to education. This is especially so at the primary level of education where many children come in contact with formal education for the first time. The language the child is confronted with at those initial days of schooling could determine whether he or she finds schooling interesting and rewarding or boring and unfulfilling. It is generally believed that the child’s creativity is enhanced if he or she comes to meet an already familiar language at school. By contrast, a child’s spirit of innovation may be inhibited if he or she is confronted with an unfamiliar language at school (Olagoke, 1979). For example, the language of instruction may determine a child’s attitude to education, participation in classroom activities and by extension how much he or she benefits from lessons.

The issue of medium of instruction has been of great concern to various governments and agencies involved in education since the introduction of Western education in Nigeria. The main concern has been to ensure that children are instructed in the most appropriate language, at least from the pedagogical standpoint. The use of the mother tongue (MT) in education is not a new issue in Nigeria, for according to the records, the missionaries were said to have used mother tongues for initial primary education. Even British colonial language policy, when formulated, also supported the use of the mother tongue in early primary education. Both the missionary practice and colonial policy must have influenced the adoption of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the early primary education in the current language policy in education (NPE, 2004). What is at issue in this paper, however, is not the use of the mother tongue only for initial literacy or as a transitional medium to the use of English subsequently as provided by the current language education policy, but its use for the whole duration of primary education. This paper explores some of the arguments for and against mother tongue education (MTE) in Nigeria. It also offers some recommendations for a way forward in the implementation of MTE in Nigeria.
2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is premised on the obvious fact that decisions regarding which languages or combination of languages to use in primary education, or any other level of education for that matter, cannot be taken in a vacuum. Such decisions are normally taken within a plethora of pedagogical, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic framework. Limage (1991) aptly observes that choice of language for education is a very complex issue involving not only pedagogical considerations, but also political, social and economic ones. And sometimes, the purely pedagogical and linguistic considerations may be sacrificed to political and economic expediencies as is evident in many African nations. Some of these issues are examined more closely below.

2.1 Pedagogical Issues

Three categories of languages are identifiable when it comes to the choice of medium of instruction in Nigerian primary schools. These are the mother tongue, a language of wider communication or lingua franca such as Hausa in many parts of Northern Nigeria and the English language. Writing from a colonial mindset, Jowitt (1953), refers to these three categories of languages as the languages of lower culture, middle culture and higher culture respectively. In modern linguistic parlance, a triglossic relationship will be said to exist among the three categories of languages with the mother tongue performing low functions, the language of wider communication or lingua franca, middle functions and English, high functions.

At the pedagogical plane, arguments often arise as to what constitutes the best language in which to educate a child among the three categories of languages highlighted above. There appears to be little argument about the value and indeed the primacy of the mother tongue or a child’s first language in early education. It is generally believed that children learn best in the language of their birth and early socialisation (Olagoke, 1979). The argument is that there is a general flow and continuity is guaranteed if a child’s home language and that of the school happens to be the same (Chumbow, 1990). Pattanayak (2003) puts it more forcefully when he argues that the best language to educate a child is that which he or she knows well and can identify with as his or her own. In a report released in 1953, UNESCO endorsed the primacy of mother education when it asserted that:

It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium (UNESCO 1953, cited in Fasold 1984:293).

A child’s education is said to be undermined if he or she is given early education in and through a second language. The argument is that the child cannot learn basic facts and concepts until he has understood the foreign language in which those facts and concepts are expressed. Olagoke maintains that instruction in a foreign language hampers the child’s educational development because the pedagogical principle of starting from the known L1 to the unknown L2 is violated. Consequently, the child relies on rote learning since he or she cannot understand the facts and ideas expressed in the foreign language. Comparing the Nigerian child to his or her English counterpart who is taught in his or her
mother tongue, Fafunwa (1977) contends that since the English child still has problems in understanding his or her language, the Nigerian child suffers from double jeopardy because he or she has to learn the L₂ first before using it as a tool for learning and this hampers his or her mental and social development.

Another often-cited problem of instruction in a second language is that it educates the child outside his or her culture, and fails to relate education to the child’s immediate environment (Olagoke, 1979). LePage (1964) maintains that the use of a foreign language in education erects a barrier between the child and his or her home. The fear is that such education that does not grow out of what is familiar to the child and his or her environment may not be effective. Jowitt reinforced this point when he noted that education for the African child must be based upon, and grow out of his or her past to which the chief link is his or her mother tongue. Pattanayak reinforces this point by his insistence that those who ignore basing children’s early education on their native language and experience and advocate for English medium primary education are guilty of robbing children of their childhood.

However, it must be understood that what is axiomatic may not be practicable. So at the pragmatic level, there may be the question of effectiveness as the child’s MT or L₁ may not be effective as the language of instruction for the simple reason that it may not be developed enough for use in education. This is especially so when the MT or L₁ merely serves as a bridge to a more dominant second language, like English in Nigeria, which dominates most important domains of national life, including education beyond the first three years of primary school.

2.3 Sociolinguistic Issues
Many social, economic and linguistic issues affect the choice and use of language for education in bilingual societies such as we have in Nigeria. One of such variables identified by Mackey (1984) is the status of languages available. Parents, for example, may be more willing for their children to both study and learn in a language with a high status. Mackey argues that:

The fact that a language is easy to understand as a medium of instruction or that it is spoken by a good proportion of the population does not mean that it will be accepted by all. People are also interested in the value of the language as expressed in its status; they do not want to invest part of their lives learning what they might consider as unimportant languages (p. 157).

Related to status is the attitude of the people to the use of the languages available as media of instruction. According to UNESCO (1953), “Some people in a locality may be unmoved by the benefits to be derived from the use of the mother tongue in education and may be convinced that education in the mother tongue is to their disadvantage.” Attitudes, whether positive or negative, are conditioned by many factors. Parents whose motivation is economic tend to be favourably disposed to the use of such world languages as English or French for their children’s education, because education in such languages means better education and better opportunities in life (Hair, 1967; Mackey, 1984; Nwadike 2002). However, nationalistic motivations could lead to negative attitudes to the use of a foreign language in education. This was the case of French in the Maghreb countries in North Africa where it was perceived by the people as the language of oppression and Western domination (Benabdi, 1980).
Another important factor in the use of language is its readiness for education. This is in terms of availability of textbooks and other teaching/learning materials, metalanguage for science, mathematics and other subjects, availability of trained teachers plus whether or not the language has been standardized as well as whether or not the children already know the language to be able to learn through it. The absence of many of these relevant inputs has been claimed for the limited use of Nigerian languages in education (Taiwo, 1976). Readiness of a language for education is important because it has to do with the economic cost of language development, and the cost could be staggering in countries with a multiplicity of languages such as Nigeria.

The number of languages available and their distribution are also very important in deciding which languages to use in education. In countries marked by multilingualism, language choice may be difficult because every ethno-linguistic group may cling to its own language even when for some pragmatic reasons such as number of speakers, lack of teachers and materials, some of the languages cannot sustain any form of education. The pattern of distribution of speakers of the different languages may further complicate or ease the problem. To all practical intents, language choice would be easier if the speakers of the language are concentrated in the same geographical area, as in that case, a local language could easily be recognised as the medium of instruction (Mackey, 1984). This could easily work in rural communities in largely Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba speaking states in Nigeria. But in multilingual/multi-ethnic states such as Rivers, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and urban centres such as Lagos, Abuja, Kaduna or Jos marked by linguistic heterogeneity, the choice of medium would be more difficult because classrooms in many cases are made of pupils from diverse language backgrounds.

The above in a nutshell are some of the factors that are usually considered in language choice for education. The point is that while the need to grant linguistic rights to citizens, nationalistic, pedagogical and other socio-cultural considerations could favour the use of the mother tongue for education, government decisions and actual practice could go the opposite direction due largely to economic, political and other political considerations.

2.4 The Concept of Mother Tongue

The term “mother tongue” (MT) attracts a lot of controversy its conception. Mills (1993) defines it as any of the following: the first language a child speaks, the language invariably spoken at home, the language in which the child is most competent and the language of the child’s community. In the context of Nigeria, some of Mills’ definitions will raise serious controversies. For example, his definition of MT as the language in which the child is most competent would suggest that there are some Nigerian children living in Nigeria for whom English would be MT or some Birom children in Plateau State for whom Hausa, rather than Birom, would be MT. This argument could also be made for the definition of MT as the language a child acquires first. Due to the exigencies of urban life and many other factors, some Nigerian children tend today to be learning English before their native languages. Would that make English their MT? The same goes for many children in many parts of Northern Nigeria who learn Hausa as the language of wider communication before their native languages and are indeed more proficient in Hausa that their small group MTs. It is unlikely that such children would grow up to claim Hausa as their MT.

According to UNESCO (1963:689-90), MT is “the language which a person acquires in early years and which normally becomes his natural instrument of thought and
communication.” UNESCO argues that a child’s MT may not be the language used by his or her parents or the first language he or she learns to speak “since special circumstances may cause him to abandon this language more or less completely at an early age.” It is easy to see that UNESCO’s definition is competency based, instrumentalist in conception, and divests MT of its inherent emotional and ethnic associations. This definition will invariably not satisfy champions of linguistic rights. Even UNESCO in its recent publications has tended to acknowledge and indeed advocate for the right of people to learn in their native languages as a way of preserving their cultural heritage and maintaining their linguistic rights (UNESCO, 2003a and 2003b). For the purposes of this paper, MT is taken to mean the same as native language or the language spoken by members of a child’s ethnic group. It may be the “home” language if used at home and for some reasons may not be the language in which the child is most competent. It is also possible for a child not to speak his or her MT. The MT may also not necessarily be the language a child acquires first.

2.5 What is Mother Tongue Education?
In the light of the above discussion on the concept of mother tongue, it is pertinent to clarify what is meant by mother tongue education (MTE) in the context of Nigeria. It means teaching all school subjects (except English) using a child’s MT or native language as the medium of instruction from primary one to primary six. English is only taught as a subject. It needs to be understood that the practice of teaching all subjects in a child’s MT in primary 1 to 3, while English is taught as a subject; and switching over to English as the medium of instruction from primary 4 to 6, while the MT is taught as a subject, does not qualify as MTE in the context of this paper.

One issue remains to be tackled head on: Are Mwaghavul children in Mangu Local Government Area of Plateau state learning in Hausa instead of Mwaghavul receiving mother tongue education? Equally, is an Ogori child living in Ogbomoso in Oyo State who is taught in Yoruba receiving MTE? Or put another way: is a Nigerian child living in another part of the country receiving mother tongue education when he or she is educated in the language of the community in which he or she lives? There are no straight forward answers. People driven by the desire to achieve cultural and linguistic rights for all would say no, as to them MTE for an Ogori child would mean educating him or her in the Ogori language. However, people whose interests are purely pedagogical would accept as MTE teaching a Nigerian child in another Nigerian language if the child already has facility in that language and can learn content through it without any disadvantage from the standpoint of teaching and learning.

3. For and Against MTE
As already noted elsewhere, mother tongue education should be the ideal situation in education. To be sure, all the developed countries of the world educate their children through the instrumentality of the MT – Japan, Germany, Britain, United States of America, Norway, for example. Even among the so called developing countries, those teaching and learning through their MTs are far ahead of those learning in a second or foreign language. For Example, compare China, India, South Korea or Malaysia with Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast or Kenya. This section examines the case for or against MTE in Nigeria.
3.1 The Case for Mother Tongue Education

A number of Nigerian educators (for example, Fafunwa et al., 1989, Bamgbose, 1992 and Chumbow, 1990) have advocated the use of MT for the whole of primary education. Advocates of MTE in Nigeria cite the now famous six year Ife Primary Education Project as evidence that mother tongue instruction is practicable in Nigeria. The aim of the project, started in 1970 and sponsored by the Ford Foundation of the United States of America, was to show that primary education in MT was likely to produce better results than the prevailing practice of switching from MT to English at upper primary. English and Yoruba were taught as subjects from the beginning of primary school while other subjects were taught in Yoruba in the experimental classes for the six-year period of primary schooling. In the early years of the projects, English was taught as a subject only by specialist teachers of the language in the experimental classes. Pupils in the control classes were taught in MT for the first three years, and English for the last three years. According to the results, the pupils taught in Yoruba for the whole duration of primary education performed better in practically all subjects (including English) than those taught in MT for the first-three years and English for the last three.

Bamgbose (1992) notes that the results of the experiment demonstrate that many Nigerian languages could be used exclusively for primary education; Jibril (1990), however, points out that much as the results of the six year primary project provide convincing evidence of the superiority of MTE over the three-three medium, caution is needed in interpreting the results. According to him:

In interpreting the results of the Ife Project, it should be borne in mind that the teachers were specially trained and adequately motivated and that teaching materials were developed by highly trained experts and were made available to the schools. These favourable conditions were capable of the distorting the comparability of the terminal performance of the experimental and control groups significantly (Jibril, 1990:113).

In addition, the “Hawthorne effect” (Fasold, 1984) cannot be ruled out in view of the publicity enjoyed by the Ife experiment. There is no gain saying the fact that the teachers, pupils and even researchers involved in the project might have been “psyched up” to achieve the desired result. Furthermore, it is debatable whether a general advocacy for MTE based on the Ife experiment is justified. For one thing, many Nigerian languages are yet to reach the level of development attained by the Yoruba language even as at the time of the experiment. Perhaps only the two other major languages of Hausa and Igbo could be said to have relatively attained appreciable levels of development like Yoruba. For the rest of the languages, the story is entirely different.

Whatever the results of the Ife Primary Project, MTE for the whole of primary education faces many practical problems. Bamgbose (1992) has highlighted some of them including multiplicity of languages and the problem of choice, lack of teachers, textbooks, metalanguage, orthography and the presence of ethno-linguistic heterogeneity in many classrooms, especially in urban areas.

A related problem is the restriction of MTE to primary education. The argument is that instruction in MT may put the child at a disadvantage especially at the initial periods of secondary education since English is the exclusive language of secondary and tertiary education in Nigeria. The likely question is: what is the point learning in MT in primary school, only to switch completely to English thereafter? The question becomes more
pertinent given the pervasive presence of English and its dominance in many important domains in the country. The fear is that MTE may further diminish the ability of primary school leavers to function in English which is necessary to cope with secondary school work. Not even the suggestion that only specialist teachers of English be allowed to teach the language as a subject only throughout the duration of primary education (Bamgbose, 1992) can save the situation. In the first place, specialist English language teachers may not be available at that level of education. Even when they are available, the government and other proprietors may not be willing to make the huge expenses it may involve. In the second place, the pupils’ contact with English will be reduced and that will, no doubt affect competence in the language. Moreover, Ogbonna (2001) shows that parents are not always enthusiastic about their children learning in the mother tongue. The study shows that MTE enjoyed the support of only 6.16 percent of the parents surveyed in a study which required parents to indicate the language option they preferred for the education of their children at the primary level of education.

These problems notwithstanding, Bamgbose (1982), Awoniyi (1982), Fafunwa (1990) and Chumbow (1990), maintain that MTE is worth the trouble. For Bamgbose, MTE is the fastest means to eradicate illiteracy within the shortest possible time; Chumbow adds that mass education and mobilization of the rural populace for active participation in national development, agricultural and other worthwhile endeavours can only be realized through the means of the MTE rather than English. As to the viability of MTE, Chumbow maintains that experiments involving the use of the MT as the medium in selected schools have recorded successes in many developing countries including the Philippines and Mexico.

Another reason for MTE, according to Bamgbose (1982), is that use of Nigerian languages in education will lead to their development. This is so because “the use that is made of the languages in education will ultimately determine their status in our public life. The more a language is used as a medium of instruction, the greater the potential of its development and possible uses in other domains”, (Bamgbose 1982:18). Advocates of MTE cite the examples of Swahili in Tanzania and Arabic in North Africa where the use of the languages in education has led to their extensive development through lexical modernization and vocabulary expansion.

Other gains that have been claimed for MTE have to do with national identity and pride. It is said to reduce the feeling of alienation because it educates the child within his or her culture and makes the people feel equal with other peoples of the world (see Awoniyi, 1982, Olagoke, 1979 and Chumbow, 1990). It is also said to be a way of equalizing educational opportunities for all children (see Taiwo, 1976) and guaranteeing justice and fairness to children who might have had no exposure to English before coming to school.

The question to ask at this point is: How ready are the mother tongues for use as the sole media of primary education? From all indications, not many of the mother tongues are ready for use in primary education from the standpoint of availability of teachers, textbooks and metalanguage for the various subjects. The most far reaching concrete effort in this direction is the production of “A Vocabulary of Primary Science and Mathematics in nine Nigerian Languages” in three volumes in 1990 by the Language Development Centre, an arm of the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC). The nine languages are Huasa, Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Efik, Fulfulde, Izon, Kanuri and Tiv. This means that the more than 380 other languages are yet to be provided with such metalanguage. Even at that, the vocabulary project in the nine languages is not
aimed at using the languages for the whole of primary education, but at the current national policy objectives of ensuring that the MT or language of immediate community is used as medium at the initial stages of primary education. Of course, it is well known that many mother tongues still lack standard orthography, codified grammars and readers.

As already evident, MTE may not only be infeasible in many Nigerian languages; it may also not be fair to all children after all. Advocates of MTE sometimes overlook the issue of what Badejo (1990) has referred to as reversed asymmetrical bilingualism, a situation where categories of Nigerians are more proficient in English than their mother tongues and use English with their children at home and send the later to schools where the medium of instruction is English. There may even be cases of Nigerian children whose home language is English and for whom MTE may constitute a liability. There may also be children with no clear-cut MT. This writer once heard of the case of a Kilba wife and an Ebira husband who interact with each other and with their children in Hausa and English. The question may be put as to what constitutes the MT of this couple’s children. Will MTE not be unfair to them?

4. Conclusion and Recommendations
This paper explored some of the issues involved in MTE in Nigeria at the primary level of education. One obvious fact emerging from the paper is that language choice for education is not as straightforward as it seems; it is a complicated decision involving a plethora of educational, political, economic, social and linguistic issues. And sometimes, the purely edu-linguistic issues and the socio-political/economic ones may point in different directions. For example, the desirability of MTE is often obviated by the pragmatics of language choice and use whereby the government easily chooses as medium of instruction a language that is ready for education at the most minimal cost; and people prefer to learn or use languages that have both cash value and prestige. This is perhaps one of the most important hurdles MTE has to surmount in Nigeria, and partly explains the dominance of English in most important domains in the country.

To be sure, the use of Nigerian languages exclusively for primary education is a tall dream in today’s Nigeria. Desirable as MTE is, its actualisation will require a lot of work on the part of the government. The following are some of the important steps to be taken:

a. There is should be a deliberate policy to get Nigerian languages ready for primary education in terms of corpus planning, standardisation, materials development and teacher training.

b. Since it may not be possible to provide education in Nigeria’s about 400 languages, there should be selection of medium languages following such criteria as population and distribution of speakers, areas of coverage, state of development and present status among others.

c. Efforts should be made to develop positive attitudes to the languages among the people.

d. Common entrance and other important examinations should be written in those languages for it will be unfair to teach in MT and test in English.

e. MTE should never be imposed; it should rather be one of the medium options available for primary education.

f. Specialist teaching of English as was the case at the initial stages of the Ife Primary Project must be ensured to ensure children are not put at a disadvantage in the learning of English which is the nation’s official and most important language today.
g. MTE should only be pursued to the extent that it does not put any Nigerian child at a disadvantage educationally.

h. MTE should be pursued only in places where it is possible and desired by the people.

References


