

Chapter Four

LITERACY IN THE MOTHER TONGUE: POLICY VERSUS PREFERENCE

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Abstract

The Nigerian government has a policy that the language of instruction at the pre-primary and early levels of education in the country should be in the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. This research finds that the societal preference runs counter to the government policy. The data collected shows that most of the private schools teach all the subjects in English Language, as well as teaching English Language as a subject. None of them use either the Mother tongue (Igbo) or admixture of English and Igbo for teaching purposes. Teaching is done solely in English. It is instructive to note that 5 out of the 10 schools do not even teach Igbo Language at all, even as a subject, as they claim that they do not have 'competent' teachers to teach the subject. The other 5 private schools teach Igbo Language as a subject. The implication of the results of this study is that both the practice and preference of the identified stakeholders/consumers in the education industry in Nigeria are at variance with the provision of the policy put in place by government. . This is quite surprising in view of the fact that there are monitoring sections at the respective supervising education offices, even at the local government levels. It appears the implementation of the NPE in terms of the language of instruction at the pre-primary/primary levels bother them less. The result also showed that all the teachers in the private schools would prefer to teach their pupils in English Language. They did not subscribe to the provisions of the NPE at all. 75% of the population studied in the public schools shared the same preference with the teachers in the private schools, while only 5 of the 20 in the public schools (i.e.25%) only would prefer Igbo as the language of instruction.

Introduction

Literacy is an all embracing concept. The ability to inform and get informed is an indication of literacy. It helps one to function effectively and efficiently in any environment. It is the ability to communicate, think critically and use language effectively. The advocacy for initial mother tongue literacy in elementary schools and in adult education has been intensified within the past three decades, reflecting new attitudes to cultural diversity, especially to multilingual and multicultural education. This paper assesses the efforts made in Nigeria, to achieve mother tongue literacy for its citizens, through a comparative analysis of the national policy on mother tongue literacy and the effectiveness of the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction throughout the six years of primary education. Although many experimental projects on mother tongue literacy in other countries are shown to have succeeded in realizing their objectives but that is not the case with Awka educational zone of Anambra State.

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Mother tongue refers to the first language an individual acquires. This language has greater prominence than any other language in the life of every individual. Afolayan (1988) defines it as "The only language of a monolingual person, which meets all his linguistic needs. It is usually the sequentially first language of a bilingual or a multilingual person". He goes further to describe mother tongue as the language that fully identifies with the personal or native culture of a bilingual or multi-lingual person. Mother tongue is the language in which a person conducts his everyday activities and has the greatest linguistic facility or intuitive knowledge.

Mother tongue is seen as a language that has the socio-cultural functions of serving as the instrument of nationalism in a speech community or nation. It is an internalized habit which emphasizes proficiency and knowledge of the basic skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Mother tongue becomes a distinctive characteristic feature of man which has the major function of communication. The child acquires knowledge of this language from his immediate family; parents, siblings, uncles and aunts at home before he is exposed to formal instruction and education. He internalizes this initial education and uses it in his day to day activities.

Most young native Nigerians grow up speaking only English, learning at best a few words of their ancestral tongues. The loss of any language comes at enormous cost to its speakers. But all languages are the precipitates of diverse human experiences, and the loss of even one impoverishes us all. The most serious language declines have occurred among indigenous communities in the America, Africa, Australia, and Southeast Asia. For these communities, the problem is acute. Precisely because they are indigenous, there are no language reinforcements available elsewhere, no other motherland where children can return to hear the heritage language spoken or see it written. For indigenous peoples, when a language is lost, it almost certainly cannot be retrieved as a mother tongue.

In the United States, many indigenous communities are addressing this crisis through experimental language and culture renewal programs organized through or in collaboration with local schools. Though different in their goals and social-linguistic circumstances, most of these programs seek to enhance children's cultural pride and academic achievement while promoting the heritage language and culture. Many programs also seek to develop literacy in the native language.

Can such programs withstand the forces driving the move toward English monolingualism? Fishman (1991) argues that they cannot; school-based efforts, he states, are secondary or tertiary to the key process of intergenerational mother tongue transmission, which must be carried out within the intimacy of the home-family-community domain. "One cannot jump across or dispense with (intergenerational language transmission)," Fishman insists; "nothing

can substitute for the rebuilding of society at the level of ... everyday, informal life" (1991: 95, 112). Thus, mother tongue literacy and in particular, school-based mother tongue literacy, are, in Fishman's framework, "dispensable" aspects of the process--potentially helpful but not essential in ensuring survival of the heritage language. Others like Bernard [1995] argue that literacy is a necessary if not sufficient factor in maintaining indigenous mother tongues.

An earlier version of the National Policy on Education (NPE) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, revised in 1981, has the following on the importance of language and the language of instruction at the pre-primary and primary levels of education:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother-tongue. In this connection, the Government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba (p.8).(emphasis, mine) ... To achieve the ... objectives (of pre-primary education), Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community " (10).

... Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary schools is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English (13).

The above represents the intention of government on paper, but could not be said to have been operated or implemented for over two decades before the policy was revised again in 2004. The revision appears not to be substantially different from the earlier one, except for a shift of emphasis from learning "one of the three major languages other than (one's) own mother-tongue". Hence, the earlier provision for the pre-primary education level is retained verbatim, while provision for the primary level is that:

- 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. (10f) Sect.4 (19e) (16) states that: 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.
- Subsection 19(f) stipulates that English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects from the fourth year.
- This means that Nigerian languages are given pride of place in pre-primary and lower primary levels of education

This now, is the kernel of this research effort. Since government policy is that indigenous languages should be used as the medium of instruction at lower primary, this paper seeks to verify empirically the extent to which the policy statement has been translated into practice. We seek to find out whether the government policy is being faithfully implemented at the pre-primary and primary schools, as well as the preference of parents and teachers in the matter. We have shown interest in these early levels of education since they serve as the foundation on which further education rest. Indeed, literacy for human liberation, which to our mind, should start with literacy in the mother-tongue, should necessarily start with the early level of education. This problem lingers from early stage to even adult level of literacy.

Ihuoma Okeke, 32, was attending adult literacy classes in Awka, the Anambra State capital. The language of instruction was Igbo, one of the three Indigenous languages the Federal Government of Nigeria supports in its literacy programmes. But Ihuoma, like many of her classmates, was frustrated. "What use can I make of this language in everyday life?" she demanded.

Ihuoma illustrates the dilemma found all over Africa where French, or English inherited from the colonial powers remains the dominant language of the civil service, commerce and academia. Africans with literacy skills in indigenous languages are finding themselves increasingly excluded from the jobs market and even literate social circles. Linguistic confusion begins from the nursery schools with teachers and parents as confused as the pupils on the role of language in education.

It should be quickly pointed out that this paper is aware of the fact that the NPE provision are fraught with their own inherent, systemic and structural deficiencies; these are however not the focus here. Accordingly, the focus of the paper is to examine the actual situation on the field as to how the language issue in the NPE is being implemented in the schools, thereby finding answers to the following questions guided this research:

- 1) What is the language of instruction in both public and private preprimary/primary schools?
- 2) What are the teachers' perception and preference, relating to whether the NPE provisions should be adhered to or otherwise?
- 3) What are the parents' perception and preference, relating to whether they would prefer their children/wards to be instructed in the mothertongue/language of the immediate environment or otherwise?

- 4) To what extent is the Igbo language used as a medium of instruction in pre-primary and lower primary levels in Awka Educational Zone?
- 5) In which school type is mother tongue education highly implemented?

The above questions form the basis of our enquires in straight terms. Throughout Anglophone Africa, English is seen as the key to economic empowerment and progress and is the preferred language of education in African classrooms. This preference has generated an Africa-wide debate-‘mother tongue versus second language education’- which UNESCO’s international literacy institute describes as one of the most important challenges facing African countries this millennium. UNESCO encourages African countries to use indigenous languages for basic education. But pupils and parents seem to believe that a basic education in English, rather than a mother tongue, will give them the upper hand in schooling and the job market. English is now a world language-

- i. At least 300 million speakers
- ii. Adopted by at least 10 countries as a national language
- iii. Has spread to at least two continents as a major language
- iv. Widely used in four continents for special purposes

French as second official language is given extra-constitutional recognition in the 1998 and 2004 editions of the NPE. The current tacit policy of Englishization continues to widen the gap between the masses and the elite and as such true democracy and nation building are difficult to achieve. Inconsistency and confusion in the practice of language use e.g. the policy of straight-for-English in the private nursery and primary schools, legislators not following their own legislations, the learn-a-second Nigerian language not beyond pilot stage after 30 years, etc.

In a class of 20 at Holy Child Nursery and Primary School, just inside Awka in Anambra State, not one pupil wants to be taught in his or her mother tongue, according to a recent study. "We don't find our mother tongue to be that important. You don't make overseas calls in your mother tongue; you don't use it in everyday life. It is not useful," one 10-year old schoolgirl states.

But research has shown that school children learn better in their mother tongue and a start in the vernacular actually enables them to perform better in other subjects as well, including a second language such as English. Children who learn to read and write on their first language or mother tongue then transfer those skills to other languages such as French and English. What is more problematic is how to start with mother tongue education in a multilingual society such as Nigeria. Collaboration between governments and nongovernmental

organisations in educational development is one major strategy that the World Conferences on Education of 1990 and 2000 endorsed.

A number of studies show that the younger the learning process begins, the easier it would be to master a second language. Apart from age, four other factors will affect the effectiveness of learning a second language. These are, namely, social environment, teachers' abilities, students' characteristics, and teaching conditions. The objectives of the MOI policy were to help students master their knowledge of academic subjects and to develop their high-level thinking with the least language obstacles. As a matter of fact, the education sector has, in general, recognized that mother-tongue teaching is conducive to the development of students' cognitive and learning ability. It not only enlivens the classroom discussion atmosphere, but also expedites the progress of teaching and learning and deepens students' scope of learning. It is now a known and accepted fact that the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in early days of schooling contributes to improved classroom learning and related academic achievement.

This has been ignored in most of the Nigeria schools. The reasons go beyond the economic value and prestige of English, or what is most pedagogically sound. They are rooted in broad social and political contexts and historical imperative.

English is a colonial language, and it continued to be the official language after independence in virtually all African countries that were under British rule. In some cases it was retained to avoid ethnic tensions; in all cases it was retained because of its prestige and association with power. In contrast, the vernaculars were viewed as backward and inferior so were not developed. Students were made to feel ashamed of their mother tongue and punished for speaking it. In most schools in the study area, for example, speaking in vernacular was forbidden in schools and punished. One popular method was to embarrass pupils by making them kneel down for some minutes or they would be canned. There, students faced militaristic discipline, manual labour, and abusive treatment for 'reverting' to the mother tongue. One informant recalls: "We were punished and abused for speaking our native language If we were caught speaking Igbo, the dormitory matrons gave us chores like scrubbing and waxing the floors, or they slapped our hands with rulers. Some students had their mouths 'washed' with yellow bar soap".

Experiences such as these left a residue of shame and ambiguity about Igbo, inhibiting many parents from passing it on to their children. In combination with the sociocultural changes noted earlier, the next effect was to redefine language attitudes and thereby alter language choices in the home. One Igbo teacher explains this, citing her own internalized belief that "our language is second best". Today it is difficult to use indigenous languages because they have not been codified and standardised. So there is a shortage of teaching materials and

trained teachers in the vernaculars. And this has often been used as an excuse for not adopting the vernaculars in schools. Now that there are more Igbo certified teachers at the school, we are better able to use Igbo as a resource for learning. Even the terms used to refer to vernacular languages are controversial. They include such terms as dialects, minority languages and undeveloped languages-all of which suggest that the languages are not rich in expression and are unsuitable for modern needs.

The long-standing neglect of indigenous languages has resulted in the popular belief that they are incapable of imparting a modern education, including science and technology. The prestigious status of the English language and its dominant role in globalisation, added to the absence of the political will to implement policies that promote the use of indigenous languages, have led to the almost complete marginalisation of mother-tongue education in most of Nigeria and even Africa.

A lack of resources and the multiplicity of indigenous languages have also contributed to the problem. In Nigeria for example, where English holds sway despite a policy of instruction by mother tongue, around 400 languages are spoken by about 250 ethnic groups. Aid agencies do not help. They tend to shun projects that do not advance the economic and political interests of their home countries. However, UNESCO has teamed up with the World Bank to encourage African governments to review their education policies in order to improve basic education in local languages. For these policies to work successfully African governments need to enlighten the public about the validity and usefulness of policies that promote education in indigenous languages. They must also demonstrate more serious commitment to promoting those policies themselves, and allocating adequate resources. Otherwise the promotion of African languages will remain merely rhetorical, and English will continue to take the pride of place at the expense of local languages.

Population Studied

The populations sampled for this study are from Awka, South Eastern Nigeria, where the mother-tongue/language of the immediate environment is Igbo Language. 10 private nursery/primary schools and 10 public pre-primary/primary schools were randomly selected to understudy the language of instruction in the pre-primary and first 3 years of primary education. 20 teachers were also interviewed/served with questionnaires from each set of schools, totalling 40 teachers in all. Thereafter, 40 parents were given questionnaires to respond to, from each set of schools totalling 80. Out of these, 38 parents from the private schools sector and 37 parents from the public schools sector responded and returned the questionnaires, duly filled; making a total of 75 responses. The questionnaires, filled under anonymous conditions, targeted the relevant question(s) raised in the previous paragraph. They were subjected to peer-review and input before they were administered.

Findings

The findings, also expressed in simple percentages, are presented in three different segments, according to the questions earlier raised.

i) The language of instruction employed in the schools:

	English language only	Mother-Tongue (Igbo) only	Admixture of English/Igbo
Private Schools	10 schools (100%)	Nil (0%)	Nil (0%)
Public Schools	Nil (0%)	Nil (0%)	10 schools (100%)
Total:	10 (50%) (50% of 20 schools studied)	-	10(50%) (50% of 20 schools studied)

Table 1

The table above shows that all the private schools teach all the subjects in English Language, as well as teaching English Language as a subject. None of them use either the Mother-tongue (Igbo) or admixture of English and Igbo for teaching purposes. Teaching is done solely in English. It is instructive to note that 5 out of the 10 schools do not even teach Igbo Language at all, even as a subject, as they claim that they do not have 'competent' teachers to teach the subject. The other 5 private schools teach Igbo Language as a subject. In contrast, none of the 10 public schools teach all the subjects either in English Language or Igbo Language only. They 'mix code' in teaching the pupils. Even English language could be used while teaching Igbo and vice-versa!

Summarized, none of the two experiences comply with the provisions of the NPE on language of instruction issue.

ii) The teachers' preference: English or Mother tongue:

	Prefer to use English only	Prefer to use Igbo only
Private Schools Teachers	20 (50%)	Nil (0%)
Public Schools Teachers	15 (37.5%)	5 (12.5%)
Total:	35 (87.5%)	5 (12.5%)

Table 2

Table 2, above shows that all the teachers in the private schools will prefer to teach their pupils in English Language. They do not subscribe to the provisions of the NPE at all. 75% of the population studied in the public schools share the same preference with the teachers in the private schools, while only 5 of the 20 in the public schools (i.e. 20%) only would prefer Igbo as the language of instruction.

iii) The Parents’ Preference: English or Mother tongue

	Prefer children to be taught in English only	Prefer children to be taught in Igbo only	Undecided	Total
Parents in private schools	32 (42.7%)	4 (5%)	2 (3%)	38
Parents in Public Schools	28 (37.3%)	6 (8%)	3 (4%)	37
Total:-	60 (80%)	10 (13.3%)	5 (7%)	75

Table 3

From the responses as tabulated immediately above, 80% of the 75 parents (i.e.60) will prefer their children/wards to be taught in English, in apparent opposition to the provision of the NPE. Only 10 (or 13.3%) opted for the use of the mother tongue, while 5 (or 6.7%) were undecided, and would not mind whether English or Igbo is employed for instructional purposes at the level under study. The reaction, whether for parents at the private or public schools appear not to be very different in view of the closeness in the figures observed and recorded for each sector.

The implication of the results of this study is that both the practice and preference of the identified stakeholders/consumers in the education industry in Nigeria are at variance with the provision of the policy put in place by government. The relationship that exists between literacy and mother tongue education must be properly harnessed to bring out its potentialities for human and national development. The challenges of the new millennium demands literacy initiatives and education programmes. In Nigeria people should come out of colonial clutches. This is so because it was not tailored to enhance equitable use of human, natural, educational and social resources of our nation. In typical Nigerian government offices, more mother tongues are spoken than the foreign language. So why should, its use not be encouraged? Literacy and mother tongue education depend upon and reinforce each other; the use of the native language enhances the meaning - making processes of a new language. It allows learners participation and effective utilization of new concepts; this in turn enhances human and national development and consequently liberates the individual. It also acts as a comfortable bridge between literacy (education) and the individual (human development and liberation).

Conclusion/Summary

In this research we sought to establish the extent to which the National Policy on Education stipulation that instruction at the pre-primary and lower primary levels should be in the mother tongue is being implemented in Awka Education Zone. An 18-item questionnaire was used to probe the five research questions set up to uncover the language situation. Let there

be a growing movement to stabilize and revitalize indigenous languages and cultures. As earlier noted, the odds against the use of the mother tongue/language of the immediate environment for instructional purposes at the pre-primary/primary levels of education in Nigeria and why it is so had been variously addressed. While schools and school-based literacy will not "save" a language, they can accomplish a great deal toward this end. When a language remains safe in its home-community environment, it can be passed on to children. Schools and their participants can support and safeguard the integrity of that sociocultural environment. In this respect, mother tongue literacy, by fostering the sharing of language experiences between young and old, is indeed a powerful tool. Adigun (2001) says:

The government at the centre must set a target date of compliance for the language provision in the National Policy on Education and those who refuse to comply must be sanctioned ... Appropriate agencies of government should be set in motion which will be evaluating regularly this provision and its implementation as enshrined in the National Policy on Education.

Finally, we make bold to say that in the absence of following the above suggestions, government should review its language education policy and opt for other preferences, rather than paying lip-service through a moribund policy.

Recommendations

The government at the centre must set a target date of compliance for the language provision in the National Policy on Education and those who refuse to comply must be sanctioned.... Appropriate agencies of government should be set in motion which will be evaluating regularly this provision and its implementation as enshrined in the National Policy on Education. The recommendations presented here are designed to enhance mother tongue education and have far reaching impact on learning.

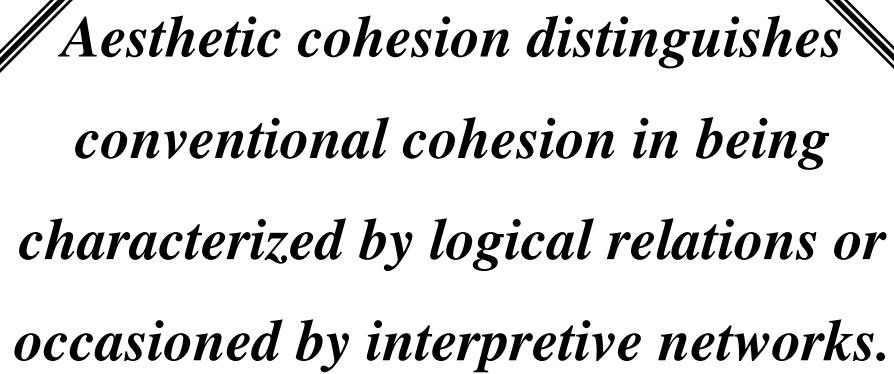
1. Inter-school Competitions (quiz, reading, debate, plays, etc.) in Igbo should be instituted in the educational zone just like we have in French. This will nurture an Igbo home video/film industry to further preserve the culture and language of the people. It is worth noting that the Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups in Nigeria have done quite a lot in this regard and are even exporting their films with English and French subtitles. Their kith and kin in the Diaspora are certainly benefiting from these films as a learning tool. This venture should continue.
2. More teachers should be trained in Igbo as the younger teachers are using less of the Igbo language for the same reasons their pupils are facing - increasing use of the English language at home.
3. That it is possible to be trained to use mother tongue in all disciplines has been proved by the Ife Project. The implication is that Igbo could be similarly used at the pre-primary and primary levels in Awka Educational Zone.

4. Attention and support of government and other stakeholders required in gradual and consistent standardization and modernization of indigenous languages
5. Development and production of literacy materials in the local languages primers, textbooks, literary materials, comics, newspapers, magazines, religious materials, etc.
6. Parental involvements via adult literacy programmes
7. Minor legislations to empower the indigenous languages

Finally, we make bold to say that in the absence of following the above suggestions, government should review its language education policy and opt for other preferences, rather than paying lip-service through a moribund policy.

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Aesthetic cohesion distinguishes conventional cohesion in being characterized by logical relations or occasioned by interpretive networks.