

The Relevance of Mother Tongue in the Education of the Child

1. Introduction:

A mother-tongue education program is a program which makes a strong effort to encourage the use of the mother tongue as a vehicle for literacy.

Indicating conditions :

Here are some conditions that indicate the choice of a mother-tongue promotion literacy program:

- The mother tongue has low prestige.
- The mother tongue is no longer spoken in all social domains.
- There is a negative attitude towards the mother-tongue culture because the culture of dominant society is more highly valued.
- Literacy in a language of wider communication (LWC) is valued much more highly than literacy in the mother tongue.
- There is a lack of interest in mother-tongue literacy.
- There is a lack of interest in literacy at all, much less in the mother tongue.
- Few, if any, mother-tongue speakers are modelling the value of reading in the mother tongue.

2. What it means to be Literate

It is very difficult to define "what it means to be literate" because literacy means different things to different people. Most people think of literacy as the ability to use the written form of a language. Therefore, before we can define literacy, we need to consider 'language'.

Language is our means of expression, who we are, how we see our world, as well as what we expect from others. Language makes possible *the communication of our thoughts* with other people. Communication involves interaction between people. One person expresses his creative thoughts orally; another receives those thoughts by listening, and usually gives some response to show understanding.

In a society where communication is oral (spoken), there is no concept of words as we see in writing. The total stream of sounds conveys the thought; the thought alone is in the mind. With the process of literacy, written symbols replace the stream of speech and understanding is gained through the eyes, not the ears. The purpose of communication, however, has not changed. Interaction between the writer and the reader is still the main purpose.

There are various definitions of literacy. For some people it may be acceptable to read words aloud with correct intonation but without any understanding. For others it may mean recognizing signboards or understanding numerals. All of these are based on the concept that literacy is an activity to be *done* by the person with no relation to his "personal, mental world".

As Hampton puts it, "The term "mother tongue" literacy means that the skills of literacy are learned through the language which the learners use every day; therefore, it is designated as "mother tongue" literacy.

One can be very highly educated, but yet is being referred to as illiterate in his/her language if he/she cannot read and write in that language.

The goal of a Mother Tongue Literacy program is that
"A community/individual has full literacy skills in Mother Tongue and Language of Wider Communication (LWC) and be using these skills to meet their relevant communication and self-improvement needs and goals."

3. The Importance of Mother Tongue Literacy

For a Christian to grow, he needs to **read** the Bible and **pray** everyday. Those who cannot read can only fulfill the aspect of prayer alone, but not reading the Bible. For them they rely only on what others tell them and cannot hear the Word if there is no one to read for them, hence their Christianity is not deep-rooted. Some can only participate in singing choruses but not hymns and reciting memory verses.

Although many people in Nigeria are bilingual or multilingual, we can assume that many people understand the message in English or in the regional languages, but what about those who do not understand any of them? They need the message too, and they need it in the language they understand best – their mother tongue, the language of the heart.

Many, if not all, governments know the relevance of Mother tongue in the education of a child, and so develop policies to support Mother tongue literacy program, though these policies may not have been adequately implemented, for some reasons.

Mother tongue education helps the child to develop skills in reading and writing his/her language as well as improving his/her skill of speaking the language and further transfer this skill into any other language. Today, many adults code-switch or code mix when speaking their language. The rate is increasing and our children will be deprived of speaking our language fluently as well as reading and writing it or they will be compelled to evolve a new language.

The development of academic skills in the mother tongue will facilitate achievement in all areas, including acquisition of languages of wider communication.

The most common teaching style involves rote repetition of whatever the teacher says. In this style, the child can be taught to recite a passage or even the alphabet, but will not be able to identify a word or a letter of the alphabet. Our literacy strategies are aimed at addressing this issue so that a child learning to read and write in Obolo will acquire the literacy skill in a very short time and he/she will be able to transfer the skill of reading and writing to any other language with ease.

Books contain knowledge. We learn from others what they have written. But books become useless if the holder cannot read. Most of our children do not do well in school because they cannot read nor can they write. Researches all over the world have shown that once a person has learned to read fluently and write well in a language he understands, he can apply these skills also, with relative ease, to any other language, which he understands. So, his ability to read and write in his local language becomes a tool for learning English faster and better. Why English?

The **English Language** has become the world's most important language. It has become the language of trade, sports, science, education, and for international relations of various kinds. To attain any level of formal education in a country like Nigeria therefore, would require a good knowledge of English. If so, what then will be the fate of the majority of our children who neither understand English, (even Pidgin English), nor do they have any idea of the nature of literacy when they start primary school? We have to provide an answer to this question.

The development of any language in Nigeria therefore, is a process that strongly upholds the **language policy** of the African Union for the continent of Africa and is entirely in conformity with the general objectives for the teaching and learning of Nigerian languages in schools as set out in the National Policy on Education (NPE).

People who talk about **functional literacy** say that literacy is not just being able to read and write, and understand written instructions. Literacy should be linked more closely to the issues of economic and technological development and improved living conditions. Functional literacy links reading and writing, and development closely to the ways in which an average person uses literacy in his own culture. It says that literacy should help people to function well in their own cultures. UNESCO adopted the idea of functional literacy and their literacy programs focus on teaching literacy while also teaching health, agricultural, or some other development.

4. Literacy Strategies

1. Transition Literacy - (L2 → L1) for those literate in a second language
e.g. English/Hausa
2. Basic Literacy - (Schools program - in collaboration with the Local Government Education Authority, State and Federal Ministry of Education)
3. Church-Based/Community-Based Literacy- (in cooperation with the church or community)
4. Development-based literacy program
5. Empowerment literacy program

The specific purpose of the literacy program is to raise the quality of educational services provided to rural linguistic populations living in the language area. This will be accomplished by (1) providing linguistically appropriate materials that beginning school children can understand; (2) training teachers to use the language spoken by the children in basic educational activities; and (4) raising the expectations of parents, children, and community leaders about the schools, teachers, and educational process.

5. Problems to be addressed

At least three problems have to be addressed in program implementation. First, the existing educational infrastructure has to be "won over" to the new strategies and methodologies implied in mother-tongue education.

Secondly, parents need to be convinced that the use of the mother tongue is not going to compromise the education of their children. Uneducated adults are not swayed so much by sophisticated arguments and statistical analyses as by their own perceptions and long-held social values. It is evident to most such people that

a mastery of the national or official language is a sine qua non for educational and economic opportunity. It is then assumed that the best way to develop such mastery is to be taught "via" this language at school.

The third problem to be addressed is that of adequate and comparable measurements. All other things being equal, researchers have demonstrated that mother-tongue education is an effective strategy for education (Dutcher 1995; Baker 1995). In fact, in some instances, it has been shown to be dramatically superior.

Innumerable variables intrude into program implementation, which skew program results. These include teacher turnover, relocation of villagers, government's education policies, natural disasters, local social disruption, sensitivities on the part of local teachers and administrators, local conflicts between teachers and communities, to name just a few. These are some of the issues that need to be addressed.

To achieve success therefore, certain inadequate educational practices will need to be tackled.

- Devaluing of language: Current practice is to teach the English alphabet as soon as possible, even as early as preschool, despite the fact that children have never heard it spoken until they come to school, and despite the fact that national school policy dictates that all preschool instruction be given in the mother tongue of the child. When people see their language written and in use academically, when teachers (highly respected in the Obolo community) write it, and also when people eventually see that mother-tongue skills can transfer to other languages such as English, the valuing of the Obolo language will probably improve.
- Lack of materials: The parents' and schools' ability to purchase materials as the program expands, however, poses a double challenge: (1) materials development, and (2) financial constraints in the community.
- Lack of understanding: Another cause of failure to teach primary school children in the mother tongue is lack of understanding that development of academic skills in the mother tongue will facilitate achievement in all areas, including acquisition of languages of wider communication. It will be our task to convince educators of these benefits, and for the schools to educate the community.
- Rote learning methods: The most common teaching style involves rote repetition of whatever the teacher says. Classes are very large and the teacher may have the only copy of a given textbook. It will be our goal to train teachers for more interactive instructional practices, and making available more textbooks for the learners will help achieve this.
- Transfers of teachers or supervisors: Frequent transfers of newly trained teachers or supervisors (or materials developers) can affect the quality of the program.

- Support of the community: It will be essential to gain adequate community support for the program to succeed. The Obolo people are proud of their language, and there is a rising sense of pride that their language is written, after generations of schooling in languages their children did not know (Igbo trade language, and English official language). However, mastery of English is widely considered the only means to success and a future for their children. It is commonly believed that English must be taught and used as much as possible (though some teachers themselves are weak in that subject).
- Teacher training in the mother tongue: Teachers lack training in use of, and in teaching via the mother tongue.
- Supervision: The Obolo Language and Bible Translation Project need to work together with the Ministry of Education to ensure proper supervision of this program at least in schools in the communities where the language is spoken.

5. Conclusion

The strategy of the mother tongue education is to improve the quality of local education in the area by providing primary school instruction in the mother tongue. The national educational policy, actually favours this.

This can be accomplished by: Solidifying relationships with local schools and other agencies involved in education in the Obolo area; orienting local communities to the structure and rationale for the program; developing needed pedagogical materials, which are linguistically and educationally appropriate and training teachers to use the materials developed and to teach more interactively.

As you will infer, carrying out a program such as the one described above is no small task. Success in attaining our goals will depend upon a small army of people, from the specialists to the teachers, local writers, local supervisors, and parents in the communities. Having said all this, we actually do expect success because, at this point at least, the "support" still lacking is that of funding and support from government.

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