

Mother Tongue Usage in Ghanaian Pre-Schools: Perceptions of Parents and Teachers

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Abstract

The present study investigated the perceptions of parents and teachers on the use of the mother tongue and their preferred medium of communication and instruction for preschool children at home and in school. The sample was made up of a cross-section of parents and teachers ($N=120$, Female=80% for teachers and 55% for parents) of children (between ages 2 and 5) in a suburb of the Greater Accra Region, Ghana. A structured questionnaire was administered to the respondents to elicit information on their perceptions on the use of mother tongue in communicating with the children. The results indicated that both parents and teachers appreciate the importance of the mother tongue, with reasons including the promoting of cultural identity, the easy understanding of concepts and for effective communication. An appreciable number of teachers and parents also support the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction in school alongside English language. The two main arguments against the use of the mother tongue in schools are (1) the importance of English language for future learning and status growth and (2) the paucity of teaching and learning materials in the local languages. Parents support the use of mother tongue at home because it enhances children's connection to their family, relatives, culture, history and identity. Recommendations made, include the provision of instructional materials and trained teachers in local language usage.

Keywords: Mother tongue education, Medium of instruction, Ghana

1. Introduction

The use of language is a subject of global significance. It is through language that we develop our thoughts, shape our experiences, explore our customs, structure our communities, construct our laws, articulate our values and give expression to our hopes and ideas (Australian Council of State School Organizations, 2007). Mother tongue is known to be one of the factors that promote solid foundation for learning in the early years (Dea et al., 2014; Carol et al., 2010). Mother tongue helps children gain high level creativity, high level sensitivity to grammar and problem-solving skills. We all speak one language or the other but each of us have a language we can call our mother tongue. Mother tongue is the language of one's origin, of intimate family experience and of our early social relations (Matsuura, 2008). Mother tongue (also called native language, arterial language, or first language) is the language a person has learned from birth or speaks the best, and is often the basis for sociolinguistic identity. The term mother tongue should not, therefore, be interpreted to mean that it is the language of one's mother.

Over 100 linguistic and ethnic groups have been identified in Ghana with these groups maintaining a sense of ethnic identity (Akramov & Asante, 2009). Due to the similarities in the various dialects and the increasing mobility of the population, a typical Ghanaian understands at least one of five major languages—Akan, Nzema, Dagbane, Ga, or Ewe as well as English, which is the official language of the country. The language of education in multilingual societies has always been complex and of concern to educators and educational planners due to the multi-ethnic and multilingual situation (Ouedraogo, 2000). The situation is more compounded when the official language of the nation is different from any of the indigenous languages as in many African countries.

In such situations, there is always controversy over which language to use in school especially at the lower primary level in multilingual societies. In 2002, a law was promulgated in Ghana that mandated the use of local languages as the media of instruction from primary one to three to replace English language as the medium of instruction. Due to the criticisms from sections of academics, politicians, educators, traditional rulers, and the general populace, the Ghana Education Service (GES) decided to implement the program "National Literacy Accelerated Programme (NALAP)" on a pilot basis in twenty districts in Ghana for the 2009/2010 academic year aimed at building on the language and experiences already familiar to children. Under the NALAP, teachers in the lower primary levels, that is, from kindergarten one to primary three, are to use the mother tongue of the children to teach them. Eleven local languages have been approved so far by the GES for the NALAP. These local languages include Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi, Nzema, Ga, Dangme, Ewe, Dagaare, Gonja and Kasem. To this point, the program is evidenced to have recorded tremendous improvement in learning abilities of the children under the programme. However, due to the differing views on the NALAP program there is the need to investigate the perceptions and views of parents and teachers of preschool children on the mother-tongue medium of instruction.

1.1 Theoretical perspectives on use of mother tongue in education

Mother tongue education in the early years is thought to offer the best introduction to literacy and the eventual acquisition of bilingualism (Mwamwenda, 1996), which is further believed to promote linguistic and cultural skills in subsequent years. Therefore this study was informed and guided by models of bilingual education and second language teaching namely; additive bilingualism, subtractive bilingualism, transitional bilingualism and immersion bilingualism. Additive bilingualism is explained in terms of how students maintain their mother tongue and acquire a second language. Subtractive bilingualism on the other hand describes the situation where students lose their mother tongue in the process of acquiring a second language (Lambert, 1975). Such situations are common in societies where one language is considered to be socio-economically more prestigious than others. Usually when this happens, the child's mother tongue is replaced by the second language, which may lead to linguistic and cultural conflicts rather than complimenting each other (Robinson, 1996). Lambert (1975) argues that, in societies where both mother tongue and second language are considered important, children gain better levels of cognitive development. This means that children will be acquiring a second language that is not at the expense of their first language; in other words additive bilingualism have not been known to negatively affect children's intellectual and linguistic development. Genesee (1977) suggests that additive bilingualism becomes more productive when a child's mother tongue is nurtured and encouraged then later the second language is introduced gradually in the cultural context as is being presented by the NALAP program. Research has shown that there are cognitive benefits associated with additive bilingualism such as promoting greater mental flexibility (Cummins, 1981).

In terms of second language teaching, the submersion model promotes the practice whereby the second language is used as the medium of instruction and the children's mother tongue is only used when students fail to understand a concept. For example, a non-native English-speaking student being placed into a regular English-speaking classroom with a teacher who understands their native language (Ndamba, 2008). In this scenario, when the mother tongue is not supported the student may lose it, which may result in negative cognitive consequences for the future learning of the child. Submersion is considered as subtractive bilingualism. Transitional bilingual model provides opportunity for children to learn subject contents in their mother tongue. English is taught as a second language mostly in subjects that require less language such as arts and music. The transitional bilingual has an advantage of helping children understand content area of subjects, which enables them to enjoy activities and to remain in school. The transitional model therefore serves as a bridge for children in terms of helping them move from their mother to a second language such as English (Krashen, 1982). They are useful in terms of assisting the child gain better understanding of concept and as a way of compensating for inadequate proficiency in the second language. This process prepares the child for immersion into the second language (Lemlech, 1994). Generally transitional bilingual education is popular in communities where native language is dominant.

Immersion is usually referred to as a Canadian model and was used primarily to support English speaking children who were learning French (Taylor, 1992). Immersion bilingual education model is considered pluralistic and tends to have additive characteristics. It helps learners to acquire two languages simultaneously. Some consider immersion programs as consisting of full or part time models. In this regard, full immersion happens when programs begin in the pre-school or kindergarten classroom and continues to the upper grades. Partial immersion on the other hand, refers to situations whereby the second language is delayed till upper elementary grades or high school. Many countries in Africa including Ghana, Kenya and Zimbabwe use immersion bilingualism (Cleghorn, 1992). Research shows that children who are supported to master the mother tongue tend to encounter less problems with regard to speech, listening, reading and writing when it comes to learning a second language (Cummins, 1981).

1.2 The role of mother tongue in education

The role of the mother tongue in our lives has been well documented. The UNESCO Committee (1953) states that the best medium for teaching a child is the mother tongue through which children understand better and express themselves freely. The mother tongue is held to be most significant for our early emotional and cognitive development. It is by means of which we begin to achieve a common understanding with our parents, family and the broader community of friends and school (Cummins, 2006). A child's first comprehension of the world around him, the learning concepts and skills, and his perception of existence, starts with his mother tongue. Early education in the mother tongue expands the verbal facility and cognitive realm of the child (Iyamu & Ogiegbaen, 2008).

It is also held that, children who come to school with a strong foundation in their mother tongue develop strong literacy abilities in the language used at school (Saville-Troike, 1988). Early introduction of a foreign language distorts the accumulated vocal and verbal facility, thought process and cognitive equilibrium. When parents and significant others are able to spend time with their children and tell stories or discuss issues with them in a way that develops their mother tongue vocabulary and concepts, children come to school well

prepared to learn the second language and succeed educationally. They explore the similarities and differences between languages. In a learning situation where only the second language is used as a medium of instruction, learners face threefold task. First, the student has to make sense of the instructional tasks that are presented in the second language. Second, the student has to attain linguistic competence, which is necessary for effective learning. Third, the student has to mastering the content itself. The consequence is that a lot of students would rather “play dumb” than embarrass themselves in a language they do not well understand (Chaudron, 1988; Ndamba, 2008; Roy-Campbell, 1996). Unfortunately, for many bilingual children who have little mother tongue support at home, once they start school their mother tongue is gradually replaced by the majority or dominantly used language.

Critics of bilingualism and the use of the mother tongue in the early years of education present some arguments for their point of view. One such argument is that the indigenous or local languages are unable to express modern concepts used in education and also that bilingualism causes confusion and that the first language must be pushed aside so that the second language can be learned. The reasoning being that the second language is often seen as necessary for further education, work and other opportunities and as such parents invariably opt for the second language when presented with the option of one. The second language offers access to education, high status and all the benefits that come with it. Some parents and educators believe that in order for children to learn a second language quickly and succeed at school, children should use the majority language not only at school but even at home. Due to this perception, the other tongue is increasingly not supported at home leading some analysts to warn of the eroding of our local languages with the future generations. These attitudes and perception, though refuted (Benson, 2004), provide a background for the controversies and challenges associated with implementing the use of the local language in early education. It is against this background that this study assessed the perception and the knowledge of parents and teachers on the use of mother tongue in early childhood education. The objectives of the study were: (1) To investigate perceptions of parents and teachers on the use of the mother tongue as a medium of communication and instruction in early childhood education; (2) To identify the preferred language(s) for instruction by parents and teachers at home and in school.

In terms of significance, the study findings contribute empirical information on perceptions of parents and teachers on mother tongue use in early childhood education. Thereby serving as a basis for further research for the Education Service and other stakeholders on ways promote the on-going National Literacy Acceleration Program (NALAP).

2. Methodology

2.1 Sampling and Procedure

A cross-sectional study design was used and the target population comprised all parents and teachers of children between the ages of two (2) and five (5) in the Dansoman community in the Ablekuma South Constituency of the Ga South District in the Greater Accra Region. The study location was chosen due to the linguistic and ethnic diversity in the locality. Thirty (30) ECE centres in the Dansoman community of the Ablekuma South constituency are officially registered with the Department of Social Welfare. Twelve out of these were randomly selected through balloting. The sample was made up of one hundred and twenty (120) respondents comprising Sixty (60) parents and guardians of children in Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres Sixty (60) teachers of those ECE centres. The teachers were also chosen randomly through balloting. To obtain the parent sample, five parents of children in each school were systematically selected by choosing every other fifth parent who was willing to participate.

The selected schools were contacted with introductory letters to seek their consent after which a date for the data collection was agreed upon with the researchers. The selected teachers and parents were informed about the study prior to the date for the data collection. The questionnaire was administered to the respondents in English.

2.2 Instrument for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions was used for this study. The questionnaire was used to elicit information on the following; Demographic data of respondents, Knowledge and Perception on the use of mother tongue in communicating with the children, preferred language used as the Medium of Instruction in ECE, and Respondents' level of education and its influence on their perception of mother tongue. The questionnaire was pre-tested in the Early Childhood Department of the Elican Preparatory School at Mempeasem, East Legon in Accra, using five teachers and five parents. The pre-test provided the opportunity to clarify ambiguities in some of the questions and simplify other questions, where necessary. The data collected was hand-coded and analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 16.0.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Demographics of the sample

Table 1. Participant's demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics	No. (%)
Gender (Parents)	
Male	27 (45)
Female	33 (55)
Gender (Teachers)	
Male	12 (20)
Female	48 (80)
Age	
20-25	15 (12)
26-30	24 (20)
31-40	17 (14)
36-40	26 (21)
41-60	34 (28)
60 and above	6 (5)
Level of education	
First degree	31(26)
Diploma	26 (22)
Teachers' Cert A	17 (14)
A' Level	11 (9)
O' Level	15 (13)
SHS	13 (10)
JHS	6 (5)
None	1 (1)

Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of respondents. The sample were mostly female ($n=48(80\%)$ and $(33(55\%))$ for teachers and parents respectively. Combined, sixty seven per cent (67%) of respondents were females and the ages of the respondents ranged between 20 years to 70 years. Fifteen respondents (12%) were aged between (20 – 25) years with the (67%) between twenty and forty years.

Thirty-one (26%) of the total sample had attained an undergraduate degree, forty-three (36%) had a diploma or teaching certificate, thirty nine (32%) had some secondary education and seven people (6%) having basic education or less (Table 1).

The respondents were predominantly from the southern regions of Ghana (93 respondents (78%), that is, the Greater Accra, Volta, Central and the Eastern regions with the rest $(27(22\%))$ distributed among the other regions.

In terms of the languages spoken, the results show that each of the respondents, both parents and teachers, spoke at least their own mother tongue. Ninety four (78%) of respondents spoke three or more languages with twenty (17%) and six (5%) speaking two and one languages respectively. With most of the respondents speaking a mother tongue, their perceptions towards the importance of the mother tongue may be more positive.

3.2 Perceptions of teachers and parents on mother tongue usage

With regards to the general importance, all respondents agreed that the mother tongue was important. The reasons given were however varied.

Table 2: Reasons for usage of mother tongue in education

Reasons	Percentage
Better understanding of concepts	19%
Fast learning	11%
Cultural identity	38%
Effective communication both at home and school	17%
No reason	15%

($n=120$)

About a third of the respondents (38%) mentioned that the mother tongue was important because it held ones cultural identity. According to Guvercin (2010), a child connects to his parents, family, relatives, culture, history, identity and religion through his mother tongue. This links the child with the culture of the society the child comes from and shapes his identity. Nineteen per cent (19%) of the sample indicated that they believed the use of mother tongue enhances understanding of concepts in school. Seventeen per cent (17%) felt the mother tongue enhanced communication at home and school because children were not using one language in school

and a different one at home. Fast learning was also among the reasons (11%).

These reasons reiterate previous reasons in literature. For instance studies in various countries have found that teachers as well as parents generally have positive attitude towards the mother tongue as a language of learning and teaching in schools (Bachore, 2014; Khosa, 2012; Iyamu, & Ogiegbaen, 2008; Cummins, 2009). Research has also shown that children may have traumatic first experiences in school (Iyamu & Omozuwa, 2004) and the early and exclusive introduction of English is unlikely to help matters. Early education in the mother tongue could help to mitigate these problems. Iyamu and Omozuwa (2004) found in their sample that the perceptions of parents and teachers were the same on mother-tongue education. That is, mother tongue helps to imbue in the child with aspects of the cultural heritage, the learners' ethnocentric and eco-centric values and an understanding of the environment (Milton, 2006; Mohanlal, 2001; Urevbu, 2001). Cummins (2009) believed that a strong foundation in a child's first language will contribute to learning another language and help them develop stronger literacy skills in the school language, because children's literacy knowledge and abilities transfer across languages from mother tongue to the language the child is learning at school.

3.3 Preferred language(s) of instruction at preschool and home

When questioned about their preferred language of instruction in school, most of the respondents preferred that both mother tongue and English language be used at the preschool level (45(75%) parents and 41(68%) teachers). The reasons proffered include effectiveness of teaching and learning, and better understanding of subject matter. The reasons given by respondents who chose English language only as the medium of instruction (13(21%) parents and 15(25%) teachers) were mostly that, English language should be the language for school to improve children's fluency, also because, it is the official language of Ghana, the purpose of schooling was to learn English and that English could "take people to places". The mother tongue on the other hand was spoken at home so there was no need for more practice at fluency. Although these respondents may perceive mother tongue as important, they nonetheless believed that in the school environment only English language should be used. These reasons correspond with those reported by Andoh-Kumi (2000) in his research on primary pupils and parents in six Ghanaian communities. Additional reason given by teachers were that English language medium allowed better understanding of subject content on the part of pupils and effective communication between teachers and pupils. Only a few respondents preferred the local language alone as medium of instruction (2 parents and 4 teachers), with the reasoning that it was practical to use a local language as medium of instruction.

The teachers were asked whether they used mother tongue in teaching, thirty-five (58%) responded yes and out of these, (14%) of these teachers stated that they used it throughout teaching and the remaining said they use it when a child does not understand concepts in English. The teachers who responded in the negative (32%) stated that they would use mother tongue in teaching if they had their own way. Constraints in terms of their schools' policies limited these teachers to teach in English language only, even though they were willing to blend with the mother tongue if given the opportunity. Other constraints were lack of teaching and learning materials in the mother tongue. Only five, out of the languages that are spoken by the major Ghanaian ethnic groups have material developed on them and these five languages cannot be imposed on the entire nation and people of other ethnic origins (Asenso, 2013).

A large proportion of parents (98(65%) also agreed that mother tongue should be taught at school with (22) disagreeing. In the literature, reasoning behind parents negative perceptions of mother tongue in education has been the believe that the second language is necessary for further education, work and other opportunities and offers access to high status and all the benefits that come with it. Other reasons is the believe that in order for children to learn a second language quickly and succeed at school, children should use the majority language (Ball, 2011). Parents in the present sample also agreed that children should be taught mother tongue at home perhaps because it enhances a child's connection to his parents, family, relatives, culture, history and identity Guvercin (2010). Hundred (83%) respondents agreed that the mother tongue is useful in a child's academic, language, and speech development including respondents with basic or no education confirming previous research (Andoh-Kumi, 1992; Fafunwa et al, 1989). Transferring from mother tongue to a second language is theoretically and empirically more probable. The mother tongue serves as background knowledge, pre-existing knowledge upon which inferences and predictions can be made to facilitate transfer (Saville-Troike, 1988).

3.4 Limitations, Conclusion and Recommendations of the Study

In terms of study limitations, the current sample is made up of respondents from one locality in Accra, Ghana and although this location was chosen because of its ethnic diversity, findings from this study may not be generalizable to other communities around the country. From the findings in this study, the few conclusions may be drawn. A majority of the parents and teachers perceive the mother tongue as important for different reasons including the promulgation of cultural identity and the easy understanding of concepts and for effective communication. Some teachers and a lesser number of parents also endorse the use of mother tongue as the

language of instruction in school alongside English language. Those in disagreement cite the importance of English language for future learning and status as well as the paucity of teaching and learning materials in the local languages. Parents support the use of mother tongue at home because it enhances a child's connection to his parents, family, relatives, culture, history and identity. Based on the findings and conclusion in this study, the following recommendations have been made: First, at the policy level, the challenges of implementing the mother tongue as instruction medium in schools should be addressed by providing the required resources, for instance, the production of relevant curriculum, instructional materials and trained teachers. Second, further studies using more nationally representative samples are needed to address the perceptions and attitudes of mother tongue usage to inform on the way forward.

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