

Mother-Tongue Education Policy: Effects on Children's Achievement in Reading Skills

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Abstract

Researches have shown that instructions received in the mother tongue are easily assimilated and permanent than those received in a second or foreign language. The thrust of this paper is to investigate on the effect of the mother tongue education policy on Nigeria children's achievement in reading skills. The study adopted the randomized pre-test experimental and control group as design. Three research questions were used as a guide to the study. Two hypotheses were also raised for the study at 0.05 level of significance. The sample consisted of 215 primary 3 pupils taken from 4 primary schools in two geo-political zones. The sample size consisted of 110 pupils from rural and 105 pupils from urban schools. Standard deviation, means and analyses of covariance were used to analyze the data. The results indicates that children in the rural schools taught in the mother-tongue performed better than those from urban schools who were taught in English Language in reading skills. From the findings, it is recommended that the language policy on mother tongue usage should be enforced as medium of instruction in the early primary schools years.

Keywords: Mother-tongue, policy, achievement and reading skills.

INTRODUCTION

By the year 2015, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and over one hundred and fifty nations of the world pledge to provide universal basic Education to all children. Their specific goal is to ensure that by 2015, all children particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality (UNESCO, 2000).

Knowledge is acquired through the mother tongue or indigenous languages. It is a means of transmitting most forms of Nigerian tradition social life. Just as the aim of education is the development of the child, indigenous language or mother tongue helps to complete this development. Ebe (2000):143, acknowledged the value of the mother tongue when he assets that:

“the need arises that every Nigeria citizen should all go out to get well groomed in his indigenous language. This will no doubt make him acquire to a very great extent all the traditional know-how of his people since all forms of traditional education are transmitted through the indigenous language. Hence, the Nigeria philosophy of education is based on the integration into a sound and effective citizen.

Afolayan in Alabi, Adebiyi and Olatayo (2008) explains the concept of mother tongue as follows:

First language or mother tongue or better still native language is the only language of a monolingual person which is acquired naturally in his native environment and which meets all his linguistic needs.

From this explanation, we can infer that every human being is first a monolingual before becoming a bilingual. It is with the mother tongue that the child first conceptualizes the world.

Language is an indispensable factor in the meaningful existence of man. It is a unique factor that distinguishes man from other creatures. It establishes man as a social being who not only uses language as a vehicle of social, cultural transmission but also as a means of knowledge advancement and educational development. Man can be said to be dead without a language and because of this necessity, a child, out of compulsion, acquires a language at birth, and this is called the mother tongue or the first language (L1) of the child.

There are 36 states in Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). Nigeria is divided into six geographical zones- south-south, south-east, south-west, north-north, north-west and north east. It has a population of about 140 million people with more than over 400 languages Awobuluyi (1998). Nigeria is one of the most linguistically diverse countries of the world. It has three major regional languages spoken widely by three tribes namely: Yoruba in the former Western Region, Hausa in the former Northern Region and Igbo in the former Eastern Region. As a result of this language diversity, the National Policy on Education stipulates that the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate environment should be the language of instruction the first three years of children's primary education (NPE, 2004). However, there are other languages apart from the three major languages spoken in Nigeria like Ibibio, Efile, Itsekiri, Bini, Urhobo, Nupe, Ijaw, Tiv and a host of others.

According to the UNESCO report of 1953, instructions received in the mother tongue are easily assimilated and permanent that those received in a foreign language. Fafunwa (1975) is of the opinion that a child taught in a language that he is not familiar with can develop skills with trauma. He believes that mother tongue is a base for learning subsequent languages and it also facilitates understanding, internalization of concepts and continuity in thinking. Also, corroborating this assertion, Opoola (2002:142) noted that:

The proper development of the child is closely bound with the continued use of the language he has from birth, the language of his parents, brothers, sisters, friends and people he is used to. It is the language in which he has acquired his first experience of life.

However, the results of the study conducted by Ali (1983) cited in Alabi et.al (2008) differs a little when he investigated on the impact of three alternative languages as a medium of instruction in learning some science concepts. He found out that the use of the mother tongue combined with English Language was more effective than the use of either of the two singly.

Researches have also shown that children who begin their education using their mother tongue are more confident and learn better than those who are made to learn in a second language in their early years (Apanpa 2009, Lawal 2009 and Wikipedia 2009). This is due to the fact that when the school builds on the foundation of the mother tongue (MT) for teaching a second or third language, the chance of successful education is brighter. Ife six year project by Fafunwa (1975) supports this.

The role of the mother tongue to ensure a resourceful educational system is also appreciated in the National Policy on Education (2004) paragraph 15(3). According to the policy, the Nigeria government states the objectives of pre-primary education received in the mother tongue thus “Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community”.

Also in paragraph 15 sections 4 of the NPE, the objectives of primary education received in the mother tongue are stated thus: “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. There is no gainsay that mother tongue education is a tonic to keep alive the intellectual potential of every child (Alabi et. al 2008).

Despite the significance of the mother tongue highlighted above, research has shown that many Nigerians prefer to speak and communicate in their second language which is English Language than their mother tongue. Most parents also prefer to communicate with their children in English Language thereby depriving them of cultural emancipation, intellectual depth and mental resourcefulness.

Ogunsiji in Oyeleye and Olateju (2003) rightly noted that there is a discrepancy in the language of instruction being used in our private and public primary schools. He asserted that “everywhere in Nigeria, the medium of instruction in our nursery and primary schools is English”. The languages of the immediate environment are not used. In private primary schools indigenous languages are labeled as vernaculars and pupils are punished or rebuked for speaking in any of these languages. According to the NPE, the philosophy of Nigeria’s education is based on the belief that every Nigeria shall have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of gender, religion, ethnic background and social status. It also went further to say that every child shall learn one of the three indigenous Nigerian languages – Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo.

In the view of Krashen (1997) in Akumabor (2010) when schools give children quality education in their primary language (MT) they give them two things: knowledge and literacy. It is his belief that the knowledge that children get through their first language helps make the English they hear and read more comprehensible. According to him, literacy developed in the primary language transfers naturally to the second language thereby making children learn to read getting the meaning of what they read. The use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in primary schools is then imperative and should be made compulsory at the primary education level.

Reading is a complex literacy skill. It is a cognitive process of decoding symbols in order to construct or derive meaning Allington and Cunningham (1996). Reading is a means of language acquisition of communication and of sharing information and ideas. (Grossen and Carnine 1990). Learning to read in a second language especially in adulthood may be a difficult process than learning to read in ones mother tongue or native language. However, at the lower primary school level, it is expected that children should be able to do picture reading and interpret pictures according to some environmental factors such as: school type, the home and the parent’s educational level.

Adebiyi (2009) opines that reading skills are the specific abilities which enable a reader to read the written form as meaningful language, read written materials with independence, comprehension and fluency and enable the reader to mentally interact with the message. Some examples of reading skills are word attack skills, which allow the reader figure out new words, comprehension skills; which help the reader predict the next word, phrase, or sentence quickly enough to speed recognition; fluency skills and critical reading skills which helps the reader to see the relationship of ideas and use these in reading with meaning and fluency.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

For over forty years now that the National Policy on Education has been in existence, its implementation has been faulty. The thrust of this paper therefore is to investigate on mother tongue education policy and its effect on children's achievement in reading skills.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The general purpose of this study is to determine the effect of mother tongue education policy on children's achievement in reading skills.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions will serve as a guide to this study:

1. What are the mean achievement scores of pupils taught reading skills in their mother tongue and those taught in English language?
2. Will the experiment and control group differ in their achievement scores before and after the study?
3. What are the mean achievement scores of pupils in rural and urban experimental subjects taught reading skills using mother tongue and English Language?

HYPOTHESES

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level significance

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between the mean achievement scores of pupils taught reading skills in their mother tongue and those taught in English language.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference between the mean achievement scores of rural and urban pupils taught reading skills in their mother tongue and those taught in English language.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted quasi-experimental research design. The study was conducted in two geopolitical zones of Nigeria – the South-South and South-West. The population of the study was made up of primary 3 pupils in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria (South-West, South-South, South-East, North-West, North-East and North Central). The sample comprised of 215 primary 3 pupils in intact classes in 4 schools each, 110 from rural and 105 from urban schools (2 urban experimental, 2 rural, 2 rural control and 2 urban) **INSTRUMENT**

A pre-test made up of 10 pictures for reading and interpretation was administered on the subjects. The treatment which was made up of teaching the treatment group reading skills in their mother tongue/language of the environment spanned a period of eight (8) weeks. The control group was taught reading skills in English Language.

In the 4 schools used for the study, 4 primary 3 teachers assisted the researcher to carry out the research. After the pre-test and treatment, posttest was administered. Ten pictures with different themes were handed over to both the treatment group and the control group. They were instructed to fill in gaps and describe the pictures in a few short sentences. Marking was done in a conference setting by the 4 teachers and the researcher after brainstorming and arriving at a standard marking scheme.

DATA ANALYSIS

Scores from the pre-test and post-test were tabulated and analyzed. Research questions were analyzed using mean while the t-test was used to test hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS

Table 1: t-test results for hypotheses one at 0.05 level of significance

Type Of Group	Mean	SD	T-Cal	T-Critical	Result
Experimental	68.4	2.4	39.8	1.960	S
Post-test	52.2	3.3			

Degree of freedom (df) = 199

S = significant

Source: Fieldwork 2012

Table 1 show that the difference in the post-test between the experimental and control groups is significant. The t-calculated is greater than the t-critical. This means that both groups differ significantly in favour of the experimental group. Therefore, hypotheses one is rejected.

Table 2: Mean score of experimental and control group

TYPE OF TEST	EXPERIMENTAL		CONTROL	
	X	SD	X	SD
Pre-test	42.3	5.1	42.1	4.5
Pro-test	68.4	2.4	52.2	3.3

Source: Fieldwork 2012

The table above shows the mean scores of subjects in pre-test and post-test of experimental and control group, with mean 68.4 standard deviation of 2.4 experimental group achieved better than the control group with

mean 52.2 and standard deviation of 3.3 in the post-test.

Table 3: Mean scores of experimental or control group rural and urban

TYPE OF TEST	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP		CONTROL GROUP	
	X	SD	X	SD
Pre-test	54.5	38.3	54.1	36.7
Pro-test	72.6	45.8	44.3	38.9

Source: Fieldwork 2012

Table 3 shows the result of experimental and control groups according to n. rural experimental group had a mean of 72.6 and urban mental group scored 45.8. This shows that rural experimental group achieved better than their urban counterpart in reading skills.

Table 4: The t-test results for hypotheses two at 0.05 level of significance

Type Of Group	Mean	SD	T-Cal	T-Critical	Result
Rural	72.6	4.1	27.8	1.658	S
Urban	45.8	5.5			

Degree of freedom (df) = 98

S = significant

Source: Fieldwork 2012

Table 4 shows that the difference in the post-test between the rural experimental group and urban experimental group is significant. The t-calculated value is greater than the t-critical value. This means that both groups differ significantly in favour of the rural subjects. Therefore, hypotheses two is rejected.

Table 5: Urban and Rural Students' Mean Achievement Scores in Reading Skills Test

LOCATION	N	X	SD
Urban	105	20.98	8.99
Rural	110	22.10	10.79
Total	215	21.23	10.23

Source: Fieldwork 2012

Table 5 reveals that children from rural schools obtained a mean score of 22.10 and a standard deviation of 10.79.

Table 6: Analysis of Co-variance (ANOVA) of Students' Achievement

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom (df)	Mean square	f-ratio	Significance of	Decisions at .05 level
Location	844.294	1	844.294	31.664	.00	Significant (s)

Source: Fieldwork 2012

Table 6 shows that f-ratio for the effect of location on students' achievement in reading skills test is 31.664; which is a significant difference between the mean scores of the rural and urban pupils. This means that there is significant difference ($P < 0.05$) in the mean achievement scores of students in urban and rural locations.

DISCUSSIONS

The result in table 2 reveals that there was no significance difference in the achievement of experimental and control groups before treatment as measured by the pre-test. This implies that the two groups were homogenous in ability before the beginning of the study. However, as it can be seen in the same table 3 and confirmed in table 1 there was significant difference in the achievement of the experimental and control groups during the post-test in favour of the experimental groups.

The results in table 3 and 4 suggest that a significant difference existed in the achievement of rural group in post-tests in favour of the rural group. This implies that the experimental group achieved significantly better than their control group counterpart. Also, rural experimental group achieved significantly better than their urban experimental counterpart. However, urban experimental group achieve better than their rural control group and rural control group in terms of their mean scores in the test. Hence, mother tongue instruction helped the subject to achieve better in reading skills and creative thinking as a result, improving teaching and learning.

Table 5 reveals the scores from the rural location with a mean score of 22.10 and a standard deviation of 10.79, while the urban counterpart obtained a lower mean score of 8.99 and a standard deviation of 10.28. We can see the extent of the difference in table 6 which shows that f ratio for the effect of location of students' achievement in reading skills is 21.664 which is significant beyond probability level of 0.05. The result of this study shows a significant difference in achievement between urban and rural subjects. This implies that location of school and languages of instruction have significant impact on achievement in reading skill test. This agrees with other researchers' findings such as (Lawal 2009; Adesanya, 2009; Ikegbunam, 2009; Apanpa 2009, Baker, 2000 and skutanabb-Kangas 2000) who agree that mother tongue education is important for the overall personal and educational development of the child. This is because children from the rural schools were grounded in mother tongue as parents and other care givers discuss with them in the mother tongue which enable them to develop mother tongue vocabulary and concepts thereby helping them to develop thinking and reading skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the result, it is obvious that teaching done with the use of MT was more effective than using English language. As a result, the following recommendations were made:

- ✚ Government should motivate language teachers to be committed so as to enhance proper implementation of the mother tongue policy especially in a multilingual society like Nigeria.
- ✚ It is important to plan for bilingual education programs especially in a linguistically diverse nation like Nigeria.
- ✚ Nigerians, especially children should be encouraged to speak their mother tongue in their homes and in the school. Our indigenous languages should cease to be called 'vernacular'.
- ✚ Instructional materials for teaching all languages such as bilingual dictionary, tape recorded, text etc. should be made available for teachers in primary schools.
- ✚ Government should ensure that conventional universities are involved in the training of first language teachers for the three major indigenous languages so as to have enough hands to handle mother tongue usage as a medium of instruction.
- ✚ Teachers need to be taught the method of teaching children in the language they understand. This will enable children do less of rote learning, repetition and copying. Children will move from rote learning to interactive learning with more of peer-to-peer relationship, think critically and creatively, read and come to their own conclusion without teachers' interference.
- ✚ Teachers should be like Nigeria need motivation and commitment to be able to implement the language policy.

The questions then arises: why advocate for the mother tongue education in the first place? Would it not be better to have Yoruba as a medium of instruction at the lower primary level of education at the south west geo-political zones, while at the north west, north east and north central geo-political zones Hausa should be used and the south east zones can avail themselves of Igbo or Pidgin English as their mother tongue?

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