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## Indigenous Languages in Pre-Primary and Primary Schools: Relevance, Challenges and Remedies

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### **Abstract**

*This study examined how the goal of the National Policy on Education in Nigeria in using indigenous languages at the pre-primary and primary level of education in Ikere local government area, Ekiti State, Nigeria could be achieved in our society. Two research questions were raised and answered. A total of 2400 pupils and 60 teachers were involved while data were collected using classrooms observation, chart and questionnaire. Frequency counts and simple percentage were used in data analysis. Findings reveal that pedagogical practices in schools are at variance with the policy provisions. It is therefore recommended that the policy be fully implemented to maximum learning at this level of education.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous languages, Pre-Primary, Primary Schools, Mother tongue

### **Introduction**

The important role of education in the growth and development of any nation cannot be over-emphasized, for a country to attain the desired development the citizens should be educated. The education of an individual starts from the early age.

The teaching and learning process in our society has always been associated with indigenous languages. As we look around us, we cannot but observe that literacy is a vital part of our everyday life. In our streets, along major road, on the panel of vehicles, the very many posters that litter our city walls and most importantly in our homes, Day cares Centres, Kindergarten and Nursery Schools are imposingly evident and so cannot be overlooked.

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Everyone is born into a home, nurtured in that home before being released to the outer world to be given the rest of life's training.

Okediran (2001) observe that parents are the first teachers children have and so are naturally saddled with the duty of passing on the experience of reading or writing to the child.

It is the conviction of the National government that the education cycle is incomplete if the Nigeria pupils are not able to use their own language and the official language of the country in meaningful communication both within and outside the school system (Kolade, 1997). It is also toward achieving national integration, in National Language as it is being practice in other counties such as Tanzania where Swahii is the National language.

The effectiveness of teaching the pupils in their indigenous language has been stressed by many authors like Olagbaji (2009) which has been established by many authors Taiwo (1976) Osborn (2007), Obanya (1992), Oluwole (2008). The use of English Language at the pre – primary and primary levels of education will make learning of other subjects too difficult. Some scholars have found that the Nigeria's use of English in School poses a number of teaching and learning problems because most of the children come from homes and environments where English is commonly used.

Efforts have been made at institutional and individual levels to develop indigenous languages and integrate it into the main stream of Nigerian education system because of its value.

Successful teaching and learning rests absolutely on the facilitators and effective learning depends on the use of language. Virtually, almost all facilities of early childhood care education have articulated the relationship between language and the teaching and learning process.

Appropriate use of language is a prerequisite for learning. Inappropriate use of language can hinder learning. In order to avoid this type of problem indigenous languages have been observed to be the most suitable medium of instruction at the pre-school level. However, how a child learns in their very early years is critical for smooth transition into the education system.

In Nigeria, the use of indigenous Language as a medium of instruction in the educational system is limited only to the lower classes of the primary school. As stated in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004).

At the pre-primary level, the government will ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother-tongue of the language of the immediate environment. Based on this therefore, the competent facilitators should be engaged in implementing adequate care to the children using the mother tongue.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

- (i) What is the policy provision on the use of indigenous language in the pre-primary and primary education.
- (ii) How frequently do pre-primary and primary school teachers use indigenous language in teaching?

### **Literature Review**

Language can be said to be a means of communication among humans. Talking about language as a means of communication revolves around the fact that the language can be classified into various types. This means that a language can be a Mother Tongue (MT) or an indigenous language of a child when it is the language of the child's parents.

An indigenous language is the language of the immediate community of the child. It is also known as the Mother Tongue of the child. Pre-primary education, according to

Awoniyi (1995) is an education facility in planned situation purposely for the group experience of three and four year old children under the supervision of a trained teacher. The early year of a child is therefore a crucial time for learning.

The pre-primary education serves as a foundation upon which other levels of education are built. The early years are very critical and important therefore the education of children should be a top priority.

Afolayan (1988) pointed out that indigenous languages act as a suitable avenue for the acquisition of other language a person may be interested in.

Infact, the first year of a child's life determines to a large extent, what the child will be in future. It is in realization of this fact that educationists are now focusing on early childhood care education in Nigeria.

Early childhood care education in Nigeria is the period of a child's life from conception to age eight. It includes all the support necessary for every child to realize his or her right to survival, protection and care that will ensure optimal development from birth to age eight.

It is a period of change during which the child learns to handle complex activities like movement, emotions, thoughts and feelings and relating with others.

The following categories of operators of the early child care education are noticeable in our society; they are the teachers, parents, day care givers, instructors, evaluators and so on.

Help to achieve success in the pre-primary education, the use of the indigenous language also known as the Mother Tongue has been emphasized in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004).

The use of the mother tongue or language of the immediate community is prescribed as a medium of instruction in pre-primary schools Government intends to develop the orthography of many Nigerian languages and produce textbook in Local Language. However, Achinivu (1984) observed that a foremost expectation of nursery schools is to teach the young child the English Language.

Therefore, nursery schools being private establishment must please their clients or lose patronage. Apparently, many parents consider articulation in English as one of the advantages which children who attend nursery schools have over those who do not.

Awoniyi (1976) is of the view that the mother tongue is not a garment to be set aside while the child is within the formal school situation. To him, the mother tongue is the language through which the child has acquired his earliest experience in life, it is the language by which he dreams, thinks, cherishes, loves, scolds and learns, Similarly, Fafunwa (1976) believe that skills can be acquired with a trauma if the child is taught in the language he is not most familiar with. To him, the mother tongue is a base for learning subsequent languages. It facilitates understanding, internalization of concepts and continuity in thinking.

All what goes on under the title of language teaching at school for the pupils pre-supposes and relies on the prior knowledge of a structure, acquired before school age. Bamgbose (1991) is of the view that by the time a child enrolls in primary school at the age of six, he would be developed a capacity to use one home language or the other, in most cases his home language or mother tongue or the immediate community. A child acquires his first language involuntarily and most unconsciously from random exposure first to his parents and second to his community, even if no attempt is made to teach him.

### **The Roles of Facilitators in imparting indigenous languages to the children:**

In learning how to read indigenous language there are particular agents that could shape the life of a child before they start schooling. These include the home, environment and parents. The most important among this agent of education is the parent.

Although social background has an obvious effect on a child's preparedness for school, what parents do with their children, even before they begin to talk, is actually more important.

As earlier said, learning started from 0 year that is from conception to age eight; it included all the support necessary for every child in terms of activities and interaction, the resources available to her to realize his or her right to survival, protection and care that will ensure optional development from birth to age eight had an important effects in influencing their language skills and pre-school performance.

According to Akinware (2009), the 0 years - 2 years is the most rapid period of brain development, laying pathways for all development functions and continues into early childhood. The 0 years is pre- dominantly a period of learning by doing. (imitation). Any negative language like curses, swear words or any evil or dangerous behaviour should be avoided by those within the reach of the child.

Clapping actions to a nursery rhyme and hand gesture are all part of communicating and can help baby remember things. They form part of memory, stimulating the neural pathways.

Parents should help child to develop interest in indigenous languages by showing him or her pictures and illustrations to support some activities for easy assimilation. Pictures should be of items interesting to the child according to his or her level of maturity. Identification of picture, toys and illustrations should form the basic of learning for every child and help babies think outside themselves.

To create a suitable learning environment for the child, the parents should provide a reading corner at home and set aside a time for self developing activities recreation (story telling) and meditation (prayer time). Read poems and nursery rhyme with pictures and illustration to them and let them see you enjoy them.

### **Methodology**

A survey research was adopted in this study. The study covered (20) twenty pre-primary and primary schools in Ikere Ekiti Local Government Area of Ekiti State, Nigeria. An arm each of primary one to three classes was randomly selected in all the twenty schools studied making a total of three classes per school. A sample size of 60 teachers and 2,400 pupils took part in the study.

The instrument was a classroom observation chart and a questionnaire prepared by the researcher for teachers to elicit information.

Validation of the instrument was done by three lecturers from the Faculty of Education, Ekiti State University. These lecturers did both the face and content validation of the instrument.

The classroom observation chart and the questionnaire was used to ascertain reliability. A reliability co-efficient of 0.88 and 0.91 were obtained respectively for the observation chart and teachers questionnaire.

The administration of the questionnaire was done by the researcher and five (5) research assistants one from each zone. The choice of research assistants was to facilitate data collection. They were asked to administer and collect back respondents' responses during their visit on the spot. Through this process, 95% of the questionnaire were returned.

Frequency counts and simple percentage were used for data analysis.

### **Results and Discussion**

Ten out of the sample schools used for this study, it was in only one of the schools that the indigenous language was used as a medium of instruction in the pre-primary and

primary classes. Further studies reveal that the use of mother-tongue in this one school was as a result of the environment of the school (Rural).

From the result, one could say that most of the pupils were from illiterate homes.

Table 1: Distribution of School by language in use.

S/N	Language In Use In The School	Frequency	Percentage (%)
(i)	English Language	18	90%
(ii)	Yoruba	-	-
(iii)	English Language	2	10%

Table 2: Pre-primary and Primary School Teachers Acquisition of Indigenous Language Use.

Table 1 revealed that only 58% or 20 out of 60 indigenous teachers sampled are professionally trained. Teachers are charged with the responsibility of imparting learning to the pupils. These teachers are unqualified and do not know what the policy says. Since no education system can rise above the quality of its teachers (NPE, 2004) it is obvious that these teachers will find it extremely difficult to deliver the appropriate language education and training to the students. To this end, English tend to be used as medium of instruction in the pre-primary and primary school without a switch over into the indigenous language.

### **Environmental Factor in the Use of Pupil's Mother-Tongue**

Nigeria is a country with a most vast number of languages with considerable speakers, and migration from one regional location is easily facilitated probably for economic reasons. Places like: Lagos, Ibadan, Kaduna Kano, Enugu, Port-Harcourt etc. are regarded as cosmopolitan cities, where people from different ethnic groups who might not understand the others mother-tongue but use English to facilitate communication within the classroom setting. In a situation, the choice of tongue is always a problem to the teacher where the pupils are from different backgrounds.

### **Parental/Individual Factor in Learning of pupils**

So many parents prefer the official language as a medium of instruction in the pre-primary and primary school to the indigenous languages. As a result of this, parents do interfere in the school practices and they do dictate for the school. In fact, schools where the language taste of parents are not met in term of practice, children are often withdrawn to schools where their desires are in vogue.

### **School Factor in Using the indigenous Language**

The use of mother tongue in educating the pupils is frown at the school authority. This situation is very common mostly, in urban private nursery and primary schools where English Language is often the medium of instruction. The school achievements and competency are always judged on the master of the official language by the parents. Since private individuals who established schools do so primarily for economic reasons, they strive towards having high numbers of pupils to achieve their desire.

Therefore, schools switch to the demand of the parents and English Language is being used as a medium of instruction from the first day of the pupils in the school till the last day. This study revealed that inspectors do not visit schools regularly to ensure strict compliance with National policy on Education (NPE) on the use of indigenous language in the pre-primary levels of education.

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## Conclusion

In this era of modern education, this study reveals that there is a transparent disparity between the policy provision and practice as far as the use of indigenous language at pre-primary and primary level of education in Nigeria is concerned. This was deduced from what transpire from the believe and reaction of parents towards the use of indigenous language in pre-primary and primary education. The fact still remains that the parents prefers that their wards be taught in English Language which is the official language of the nation, so that they could speak English Language fluently.

In addition some of the pupils are not from the same ethnic groups and their indigenous language are not the same. In essence, English Language gained an upper hand as the only language with which pupils could be taught generally.

## Recommendations

Based on these findings, it is recommended that:

- The indigenous languages should be used in the pre-primary and primary level of education in Nigeria.
- Penalties attached to the speaking of the pupils' indigenous language in some pre-schools should be discouraged so that the pupils will learn their indigenous language in practice.
- Pre-primary school teacher education programme should reflect training in their mother tongue so that they would be more efficient, knowledgeable and productive in imparting it to the pupils.
- Proper supervision and monitoring by the education agencies on pre-primary schools teachers so as to ensure that they comply with the NPE. In order to enhance uniformity and quality in practice.
- The objectives and relevance of the document policy. (National Policy on Education) to the teaching and learning process should be understand by the teachers so that their efforts will be tailored towards the direction.
- Teachers who are not fluent in mother tongue should be made to teach at the upper level of the primary school rather than the lower classes of the school.
- Pre-primary and primary school should be monitored by the government in ensuring that capable hands were engaged as facilitators. Technical words expressed in English Language should be reduced to the pupils' mother-tongue. This can be achieved through the consultations of the meta language designed on the pupils mother tongue, attending workshop, seminars and in-service training regularly.
- In order to eradicate the problem of choice of mother-tongue by teacher where the pupils are from different backgrounds, it is suggested that the pupils could be grouped into classes according to their ethnicity, like Primary 1A for Yoruba speakers, Primary 1B for Igbo speakers, Primary 1C for Hausa speakers. Actually, mother-tongue do not only preserves the cultural value of the people permanent in the pupils and affords them the opportunity to transfer learning appropriately.

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