Mother Tongue Literacy and Early Reading Pedagogy

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Abstract

This study is a call for a return to what the policy recommended albeit with some slight modifications. The National Policy on Education 1977 revised 1981 recommended a -three -year of early instruction in mother tongue of the child. The current study noticing the failure of various stakeholders in early education industry in Nigeria, stressed the importance of language of the immediate background of the child. The position paper established the fact that, learning to read in the target language becomes easier with good foundation from the home language using the PIRLS assessment test scores to back this position. Among the recommendations proffered for overcoming the challenges posed by not implementing what was in the National Policy on Education 1977 revised 1981 document, is six years of early instruction in mother tongue, establishment of departments of indigenous languages in the nation's universities in some parts of the country where there has been none, motivation for pupils and teachers to encourage its use in classroom and social setting during the school hours and call to NRDC for good language planning at the levels of status and corpus as well as translating some good novels written by Nigerians in English language to Nigerian indigenous languages.

Key words: Literacy, mother tongue, early language instruction, PIRLS, TIMMS, NPE and RRP.

Introduction

The word, literacy has attracted itself to several definitions depending on the angle or the perspective of the user(s). For example, one is said to be literate if the person is able to manifest a special skill in doing one thing or the other. Simply put, literacy could mean, being able to display manual dexterity in the use of computer, a particular musical instrument, health, financial, digital and other forms of literacies. Globally at the moment, the pervasive vocabulary is 'digital literacy' which is all about being able to access or process information electronically through a website for mutual or one's benefit. Succinctly stated, the word literacy connotes different things to different users based on its pragmatic functions. From 1958 till date, the United Nation Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has provided readers with several information on how to fully comprehend the word literacy. First, literacy was initially viewed as competence in letter - word recognition that was to aid the learner's capability to read and write simple sentence. Since 2005, historically, and given the dynamic nature of most societies, the word literacy according to UNESCO, has undergone a long process of transformation. UNESCO (2005) for instance, opined that, "literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her potentials and participate fully in community and wider society" (UNESCO, 2005, p.21). Enunciating the concept of literacy further, the same source, albeit different year, shed more light on the term literacy by describing it as "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, using printed and written (and visual) materials associated with varying context (UNESCO, 2018, para.1).

Irrespective of the various transformation, that is, literacy either perceived as functional competence (Montoya, 2018) meaning ability to read and write at the minimal level of competence; or technical literacy, for example, ability to display competence or function effectively well over a wide range of challenging tasks either for corporate or one's benefit, neither is possible without the instrumentality of a spoken or written text. For the purpose of this exercise, however, the word, 'literacy', shall be examined in line with its primary or foremost definition; *the ability to read and write.* This ability loosely stated, means basic competence in reading, writing as well as minimal arithmetical knowledge required for daily survival. The candid opinion that these writers are trying to propagate is that, one of the basic skills of communication, reading, is the bedrock of either functional or technical communication just highlighted. Of equal relevance also is that, this all- important foundation skills of communication cannot be successfully introduced to learners of any grade without a spoken or written text. The question that readily comes to mind at this juncture is, with what kind of language can learners be best introduced to early reading pedagogy in order to develop functional literacy, which will eventually serve as foundation for technical or advanced form of literacy? Is it appropriate to introduce learners to teaching and learning of reading with the child's language of immediate background or his /her target language of wider instruction in school? What is the position of National Policy on Education in regard to language of early instruction? These are the motives of this academic engagement.

Importance of Early Reading Pedagogy Using the Child's Home Language

The importance of mother tongue in literacy (reading and writing) development of a child cannot be over-emphasized. Researchers all over the globe have stressed that exposing children to formal teaching /learning situation using their mother -tongue or their language of immediate background will assist them to effortlessly learn the target language which in the case of Nigeria, is English language (Ayedun, 2014 & Ketsitlile, 2011). This position has been corroborated

in the findings of Wodisha (2018) while investigating the role of mother tongue literacy on students' English language reading comprehension. The investigation conducted with the use of Shinashigna language, a language spoken by the Benishangul Gumuz Reginal States (BGRS), a location within the region of Ethiopia affirmed this. Using questionnaires, interview and observation as instruments for data collection (mixed study kind of research), to investigate 74 grades four students and their parents, the result indicated that mother tongue impact positively on reading comprehension performance of the subjects. This position had been established long ago by a late Nigerian erudite scholar and former Minister of Education, Professor Bab Fafunwa. The outcome of his experiment known as Ife Primary Education Research Project (1970- 1978) published in 1989 showed the importance of using the mother tongue in the teaching and learning in the target language. To compliment the work of Fafunwa, a linguist, an erudite scholar from the University of Porthacourt, late Professor Kar Williamson (1935 -2005), also initiated the Rivers Readers Project (RRP) in 1970. The project was an exercise undertaken by this specialist and some of her colleagues, to introduce beginning learners to reading and writing in primary schools in 20 indigenous dialects or languages of the Ijaw speaking community to further stress the effectiveness of utilizing the L2 to start -off early reading pedagogy. The byproduct of this researcher's initiative was the production of several books such as Queen Primers, teachers' notes, spelling manuals and several Ijaw folk tales in Ijaw dialects. The then well-embraced and approved recommendation of Williamson after the initial success recorded, had since become moribund but for the efforts of the former Governor of the state, Rotimi Amechi, who relaunched the Rivers Readers Project again in 2012. The fall- out of the initiative of this former state's excellency, led to the adoption of 14 Rivers State languages as "Nigerian languages spoken in Rivers State" (Position Paper on Indigenous Language Education, 2012, Para.1). The languages are: Abuan, Degema, Echie, Egbema, Egene, Ekpeye, Eleme, Gokana, Ibani, Kana, Ndoni, Odual, Ogba and Okrika. The Federal Government of Nigeria's statement for the adoption of these languages for early teaching learning of reading and writing reads thus:

> The National Council on Education has approved the use of these orthographies for teaching and learning. Therefore, the orthographies were ratified as standardized systems of writing of these languages with the ultimate aim of stimulating the production of materials to be used in schools for reading, writing, literature and learning (Enyia: Position Paper, RRP, 2012, para. 2).

The phrase, *ultimate aim of stimulating the production of materials to be used* as stated above needs further investigation. This last remark is crucial because nobody is aware of what has happened to the production of materials, that is, relevant reading materials for the approved languages since the exit of the then governor.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) was inaugurated in 2001 as a follow - up to 1991 International Association of Education Achievement (IEA) in Reading Literacy Study. The responsibility of this international body is to conduct assessment test for 4th grade children on reading achievement. This is to assess their progress in reading literacy and to monitor countries' education indexes with particular reference to literacy development and general progress in teaching learning situation of the participating countries. In a nutshell, it was set up to measure trends in students' reading – literacy achievement for children whose age range is between 9- to 10-year-old (Mulis, Michael, Eugene & Kennedy, 2003).

How is it done? Fourth-grade students and their teachers are the target, teachers and principals of these students are usually given questionnaires to fill, to provide information about their "students' school experiences in developing reading literacy" (National Centre for Education Statistics, n.d.) Thereafter, reading assessment examination would be presented to the pupils and graded, to evaluate the reading performances of the pupils taking part in the test. Sixty-one (61) countries excluding Nigeria, took part in 2016 PIRLS assessment test on reading literacy (Mullis, Matin, Foy &Hopper, 2017). The assessment is conducted every five years. Right from its commencement in 2001, Nigerian children had not participated in the test and it had since been conducted in 2006, 2011, 2016. The result for the 2016 assessment scores on reading showed that the mother tongues of the pupils that participated in the assessment were used to prepare their questions and they performed creditably well in the text. This position of these researchers after thorough scrutiny of the result of countries that participated in the 2016 study, reviewed by Mulis, Martin Foy and Hopper (2017), just cited is that, should another language other than the mother tongues of the participants was used for the exam, the result probably would not have been that excellent for the ten countries adjudged to be the best performing countries in the assessment.

For example, Russian Federation has Russian language as the official language even when the country has other 37 official languages in their republics. About 110.8 million of the population of 145.5 million use the language, that is, Russian, language of their early instruction as at 2016 (Kovaleva & Kuznetsova, 2016). The overall average scale score in 2016 reading assessment for Russian Federation was put at 581. The international benchmark was 500. In other words, any country whose children's average

performances is above 500 is rated to be performing at the optimum reading literacy level. Thus, Russian Federation outperformed every other country that took part in the reading assessment test of 2016 conducted by the IEA/PIRLS. Other countries' performances are in these orders: Singapore, 576 and the language of instruction is English language for all levels of education, although it has de jure Malay, Chinese and Tamil as the national languages taught in school as subject (Dixon, 2005 & PIE News Blog, 2018), but English language has become their language of early instruction. It is also the official language while Malay, Chinese and Tamil are national languages, these are the languages of the major three ethnic groups in Singapore according to the source just cited.

Hongkong under the China Republic uses Cantonese as the medium of early instruction (Bonnie & Catherine, 2003) her score stood at 569. Ireland had 567 and Irish is the medium of instruction as well as official language (Ceallaigh, 2015). The teaching of this language, that is, Irish in school is obligatory. Finland scored 566 but the language of early instruction is three in number namely; Finnish (Suomen), Swedish (Sverge), and Lapp (Sami) (Finland Education System, Overview, n.d). Poland pulled an overall average of 565 with Polish being the medium of early and further instruction. The country, however, recognized the plight of the minority groups and allowed German, Ukrainian and Belarusian or Kashubian to be taught in school (Lockiwicz, Sarzanna- Przylska, & Lipowwska,2018). Northern Ireland, Norway and Chinese Taipei had 565, 559 and 559 respectively. Northern Ireland medium of early instruction is English, although the new revised curriculum stated that teachers should try as much as possible to instruct the child in the language brought to the classroom (The Northern Ireland Curriculum: Primary, 2007 Norwegian and Mandarin, are the languages of early medium of instruction and official languages in Norway and Chinese Taipei (Hwawei & Yi-ling, 2016). England, of course, is English language and their score in the assessment was 559. In all, the ten countries stated outperformed other participating countries in the 2016 PIRLS International Assessment Test (PIRLS/ ePIRLS Results, 2016 by Mullis, Matin, Foy & Hopper, 2017).

Another important test of international repute being organized by International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) is referred to as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Just like the PIRLS, the TIMSS assessment test, launched in 1995 has been providing information on achievement gaps in Mathematics and Sciences among the participating nations. Established since 1995, TIMSS Assessment Test in Mathematics and Sciences had provided information on achievement of children in their 4th and 8th grades for the past 20 years in Mathematics and Sciences with latest one conducted in 2019. The latest result released showed that children from countries whose languages of early instruction are their first, native or mother tongue, did quite excellently well even in assessment test in Mathematics and Sciences. Among the 64 countries that took part in 2019 assessment test in Mathematics and Sciences, children from the ASIAN countries outperformed others. The statement below provides basis for this argument: As global study TIMSS turns 20, new results show East Asian students continue to outperform peers in mathematics Achievement rises, gender gaps narrow, and schools are safer, reports IEA's TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College Chestnut Hill, Mass. (11/29/2016) — Singapore, Hong Kong SAR, Korea, Chinese Taipei, and Japan continue outperforming all participating countries in mathematics at the fourth and eighth grades, maintaining a 20-year edge according to results released today from TIMSS, the longest running, large scale international assessment of mathematics and science education in the world (Mullis, Martin, Foy, Kelly, & Fishbein, 2020 as cited in TIMSS 2019 International Results in Mathematics and Science) .

Citing the above source further, out of the highest international average benchmark for participating countries, Singapore had 625; Hongkong, 602; Korea Republic, 600 while Chinese Taipei and Japan had 599 and 593 respectively.

In fact, in TIMSS's Physics conducted in 2015, the average performances of those whose home languages are the languages in which the test for the assessment was constructed that is, those who speak the language at home; of the 9 participating countries, Slovenia had an average of 534, Norway, 512 and Russian Federation with 505 to occupy first, second and third respectively (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Cooper, 2017).

The basis of the arguments so far is that, countries that embraced early teaching and learning using the home languages of their children always excel in their academic performances as the results for PIRLS 2016 indicated. Both the PIRLS/TIMSS' performance indexes shown require maximum efficiency in reading comprehension and top performing countries had the questions before them set in their home languages.

There is a strong tie between language and the users. This connection ranges from culture, belief systems, geography, environment, religion, food items and everything within the community of the user of that language, hence, the need to embrace the teaching and learning of early reading pedagogy using the child's contact language. In other words, proficiency in one's language is gateway to embrace and appreciate everything associated with the society of the speakers of that language. Thus, helping the child to learn to read in that language ab initio is helping him to develop love and interest for things around his or her society.

For instance, the Hausa, Igbo and the Yoruba are the three most recognized Nigerian languages according to 1979 constitution and the National Policy on Education earlier emphasized. They are regarded as languages of integration and national unity. In addition

to this, there are of course, so many other regional languages allowed to be taught in the Nigerian pre - primary and in primary schools for the first three years of the child's education (section 2, para 14 and section 3 para 17 e & f NPE, rev, 2004). These are referred to as languages of the minority group in Nigeria- the statement in connection with the number of speakers of that group. The Federal government of Nigeria did quite a great deal by according these languages recognition in the Nigerian education system, because they are allowed to be taught in the pre-primary, primary 1-3 and adult education to pave way or serve as forerunner for introduction to permanent language of instruction from upper primary school to the university. However, some questions appear to be begging for attention. First, is three years of initiation or immersion to home language or language of the immediate background of the child adequate for complete acculturation or integration of the child to their home languages? Would the child have developed enough linguistic and communication competence needed as foundation for introduction to target language of instruction and official communication? Could it not be a case whereby this arrangement is just to breed mediocrity and academic incompetence children, that are neither proficient in their home languages or the target language of instruction? In addition, how about the fully implementation of the NPE on education in regard to language policy in the face of so many mushroom and standard nursery and primary schools scattered everywhere in Nigeria? What about the contribution of the parents of the child who prefer to encourage their children to speak adulterated English at the expense of the language of their home language.? These types of homes usually sabotage the efforts of teachers following the prescription of the NPE on language of early instruction. It is worrisome to discover that most of these schools are located in the rural area of the country; they can hardly be found in the metropolitan part of Nigeria. This is because in the metropolitan part of Nigeria, there are so many privately-owned nursery and primary schools that are all- English teaching and parents prefer to send their wards to these schools, thinking they would develop sound communication competence in spoken and written English. Ayedun and Odeniyi (2019) in a survey of primary schools in Ogun State, discovered that most of the primary school teachers investigated in the four dialectical zones of Ogun State, have shifted completely from the dictate of the NPE. They have almost moved to all-English classroom. Further inquiry to investigate why this is so revealed that the Ministry of Education in the state did not also help matter.

It has been established by researcher that the level of competence in the home language of the child has a direct influence on how a child will exhibit proficiency in target language of latter instruction (Adebiyi, 2012). The researcher just referenced further asserted that any form of breakdown or discontinuity in the learning process of the home language before the child is fully integrated into the language will adversely affect spoken and written proficiency in the target language. The researcher, therefore, recommended 6 years of immersion into home language before the introduction into target language.

Reading in target language is facilitated when a child has a rich and sound background of L1 or language of the immediate background. Thus, it is imperative that stakeholders in the education sector in Nigeria should ensure that various languages of the immediate background of the child, whether major or minor, are developed at the corpus and acquisition layers of language planning to guarantee effectiveness in teaching and learning of these languages. This will make transition to target language to be very smooth and easy for the child, the reason being that, the child having developed cognitive competence in the home language, will now find it easy to read effectively in the target language. Whenever a child is well immersed in the language of his background, concepts found relevant in his language with that of the target language are usually not difficult to integrate into target learning according to sociocultural theory of Vygotsky earlier postulated for this study.

Suggested Actions

There is no how the foundation of the Nigerian Education System should be absolved or exonerated from underachievement of the Nigerian students in their internal and external examinations generally. This worrying trend does not limit itself to a particular level of education in Nigeria, virtually every category of the Nigerian education sector has suffered a great deal due to challenges of dismal performances in reading - related examinations among these scholars. It appears the higher institutions are the worst hit as lecturers of various institutions keep berating the inability of their students to communicate their thoughts effectively well during examinations. Since the level of reading proficiency has been affected right from the cradle of their academic, the negative consequence is that most of them now find it rather too hard to communicate effectively in writing as enunciated in the study of Bodunde and Sotiloye (2013). These researchers, in a critique of undergraduate students writing skill in ESL setting, using one of the Nigerian universities as case study, found out that the bane of the problem of the 100 level and 500 level students used for the study, is inability to express themselves well in written English. There is a very strong connection between reading and writing.

The way out is to do what the National Policy on Education advocated. Let the pupils learn to read in their native language thoroughly before introducing them to writing in the same language, that is, language of their birth. Undergraduate students are failing their exams because of lack of solid foundation in their native languages. The same is said of senior secondary school students because they are not well-grounded in reading and writing in the language of their immediate backgrounds. Most of the encounter often experienced while reading in target language are common things

that learners ought to have familiar themselves with when they were introduced to early reading in their home languages.

To achieve maximum success likely to revamp the current dwindling education system in Nigeria, the number of years to spend learning the mother tongue should be increased to a maximum of six years in line with the recommendation of the researcher earlier cited in this study. This is to help them to fully develop all the domain of their learning -related activities—cognitive, affective and psychomotor (Bloom,1956) in their native languages. A situation whereby they are stripped -off of the opportunity to be well-grounded in their native languages after just three years of exposure to it would only make them to be half-baked in the use of these languages. Thus, it is good to have them better prepared and well-equipped in these languages so as to prepare them for the likely challenges of the target language, which automatically becomes their language of instruction after primary school. Introduce them to English language at the junior secondary school while English language should be taught as subject from primary one to six. This is in line with the recommendation of Alidou, Brockutne, Heugh and Wolf published by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Association for the Development of Education Africa (ADEA) and the African Development Bank (ADB) (2011), that African languages should be used as medium of instruction for at least six years in primary schools so as to make children well-grounded in their relevant socio-cultural milieu to enhance smooth and effective education.

Our experiences as university teachers for more than two decades have shown that the Department of African Languages in most universities in Nigeria are short-staffed and that, students' enrolment to these departments are not encouraging compared to foreign languages, particularly, English language. In fact, some universities in Nigeria do not have the Department of African Studies as lamented by Egbokare, (2021), who blamed this to lack of vision and desire for anything foreign. He cited the examples of universities located in the Southsouth and Middle belt regions of Nigeria, who have not floated any of their indigenous languages as course of studies in their universities, exonerating only the University of Benin teaching Edo language up to PhD.

Aside this position, lack of motivation and encouragement by the government and its relevant stakeholders in primary education could be a prime factor for unwillingness to study the indigenous languages. A situation whereby primary school pupils are forbidden from using the so called "vernacular" by their teachers connotes a wrong signal to students who would have developed love for studying them in the higher institutions. Let the encouragement come from the primary school teachers first, in fact, if possible, the use of English language should be limited to only the classroom setting. For every other activity outside the classroom, the use of the language of the immediate background of the child should be encouraged and promoted. It is sad to know that why foreigners are yearning to study the Nigerian indigenous languages, having some departments in their universities devoted for teaching and learning of these languages as well as the cultural values inherent in them (for example, Department of African Studies, Harvard University, Indiana University, Bloomington and Morgan State University, to mention just a few), much is not being done to promote them at the home level.

The initiative to accord the teaching and learning of reading and other communicative skills using the background language of the child, a prime of place they deserve, should emanate from the various state executives, who also know that should care not taken, their languages will undergo complete extinction. Of course, some state executives have tried in this noble venture, the former Governor of Rivers State earlier cited; and it was also reported that Governor Udom Emmanuel of Akwa Ibom State in 2017 issued directives that the secondary schools in the state should start the teaching of Ibibio language. In fact, it was even reported that this language is now being taught as a course of study in Akwa Ibom State College of Education (Egbokhare, 2021).

Relevant to this is that every stakeholder involved in early education should re-examine their education policies, and if necessary, reviewed in line with the recommended National Policy on Education as it relates to language teaching and learning. Primary one to six textbooks should be printed and published in the language of the immediate background of the child as done in the experiment of Professor Aliu Fafunwa in his Ife Readers Six Year Primary Project 1970- 1978 and Rivers State Readers Project of late Professor Ker Williamson which was ignited again during the time of Governor Rotimi Amechi. Lastly, language planning, particularly at the corpus level should be revisited by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development (NERDC). At this level, three level of language planning are often the focus of the planners; namely, graphization, standardization and modernization. At the first level, that is, graphaization, planners are saddled with the responsibility of developing lists of glossaries and technical terms to describe the language when converting the language to written forms.

Here, planners are expected to take into account the development, selection and modification of the spoken and the spelling forms of the language to be converted to writing format. In other words, the structures of the language must be clearly defined and spelt out, meaning that the vocabulary, grammatical and the phonological elements of the language should be considered in details at this level of planning. The reason being that the written format may be a bit different from the spoken form in use before the consideration to put the language into written symbol (Ferguson, 1968).

At the standardization level, care must be taken because the process often involved the superimposition of one language on the other in a

multi-linguistic environment. In such a situation, the choice of the written form must be in accordance with mutual consent of the most preferred language spoken by majority of such a linguistic environment. More often than not, features of most languages are inherent in the other, especially, languages that are co-related and use by almost all people with close socio-cultural and economic affinity, these features should be taken into consideration while planning at the corpus level of language planning for mutual acceptability and intelligibility. For example, in Botswana of Tsana people, despite the fact that there so many languages spoken by these people, Setswana was adopted as the national language of the people, developed at the levels of status, acquisition and corpus. An average Motswana with standard 3 level of academic background, can speak this language flawlessly and effortlessly (Ayedun, 2014).

Language of a given community as a result of innovation and creativity cum advancement in technology, is subject to periodic changes, hence, the dynamism of human language. Thus, planning at the modernization level should take cognizance of this. Curriculums, syllabus and textbook designs for languages must be adjusted from time to time to give room for these changes and their accommodation into teaching and learning of languages. How are these suggestions incorporated into teaching and learning of reading in the language of the child's background? Good stories written by renown writers by Achebe, Soyinka Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi and other writers can be translated into languages of the immediate environment of the child to prepare them for teaching and learning in the second languages L2. The country, Nigeria, is faced with myriads of problems dealing with language planning at the corpus level and the NRDC should take these suggestions as big challenges.

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