

Assessing the Need for Literacy in the Mother Tongue for National Development

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Abstract: The study investigated the need for literacy in the mother tongue for National development. The study reveals that Nigerian languages are not taught adequately in the schools and that parent are not even encouraging their children to study Nigerian languages. The study raises three hypotheses to test whether differences exist between a literate person in the mother tongue and non-literate person in the area of Standard of living: accessibility to occupation and understanding of political development and attitude to social developments. Two hundred and twenty samples drawn from different occupations were interviewed through questionnaire which was self reporting and personal interview. The responses were analyzed and subjected to t-test statistical analysis. Some of the findings revealed that literacy in the mother tongue could improve the standard of living of an individual in the area of health, nutrition and better living. It was found that it will lead to better understanding of political situations and social behaviour. It will enhance accessibility to employment giving the individual the opportunity to contribute to the growth of the nation. It was recommended that Nigerian government should encourage the teaching of Nigerian languages in the primary and secondary schools.

Key words: Literacy, mother tongue, national development, life skills, standard of living, social behavior, virtues, values

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is commonly considered as ability to read and write in any language. It is very difficult to give a concise definition of literacy because scholars from different disciplines look at it from different points of view. When it is even considered as ability to read and write, the proficient level has not been defined. At times, it is defined as a technical capability to decode or reproduce written or printed signs, symbols or letters into combined words. Literacy is not an inborn human characteristics, it is learnt hence people talk about different forms of literacy such as computer literacy, mathematical literacy or referring to somebody who has knowledge in a particular field as literate in such field. Literacy when combined with education will lead to an individual's happiness and well being of individual and society, economic growth, government practice of democratic principles and accountability. A high level of literacy will lead to functional literacy. This is the acquisition of skills which will make the individual able to read, write and calculate figures. This will enable the individuals to carry out activities they need to function effectively in the society. Some of these activities include reading books and newspapers, reading training manuals

in the workplace, understanding road signs and keeping of records for accounting purposes.

Language is very important and central to the teaching and learning process because language is the medium through which all the subjects in the curriculum are taught in the formal education from primary to tertiary institution. It performs other functions in the society. It serves as a unifying factor, means of mutual intelligibility, official and commercial purposes. Language is essential for the overall socio-economic and political development of a nation. It is a cultural identity which must not be lost or allow to go into extinction.

The importance of language is recognized by every government in the world. The Universal Declaration of Linguistics Right endows the individual with certain inalienable personal rights in language matters. This includes the right to be recognized as a member of a language community, the right to the use of one's own language both in private and in public. The right for the individual's culture on language to be taught, the right to interrelate and associate with other members of one's language and culture on the communication media and the right to receive attention in one's own language from government bodies and socio-economic relations.

It is unfortunate that many people are not aware of these linguist's rights. Many people ignore their indigenous languages because they feel that such languages are inferior. A language is as strong and superior as the speaker. Infact, most people of the world are identified by their languages. Language is an important regulator of individual consciousness and social action. Language exists both as subjectivity and objectivity. As subjectivity, it structures an individual's intentions and thought processes; as objectivity it preserves and makes public vast systems of knowledge in human societies. Therefore, many people do not pay attention to their first languages which is generally referred to as mother tongue. Mother tongue for the purpose of this study is the language a person acquired naturally in his (native) environment and which meets all his linguistics needs. If one acquires a mother tongue only and such a person is unable to speak any other language that person is monolingual. Mother tongue can be a sequentially first language of a bi/multilingual person. For instance, a Yoruba bilingual who was born and grew in United Kingdom uses English language for most of his needs without having to recourse to using Yoruba.

In Nigeria, Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Edo are mother tongues for Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo cultural groups. Akindele and Adegbite (2004) define mother tongue as "the language in which a bi-multilingual person conducts his everyday activities in which he has the greatest linguistic facility or intuitive knowledge. A native speaker of a language is exposed to the language barely in all the hours of the day, he uses the language both at formal and informal interaction. He understands the rules of pronunciation, syntax, lexis and discourse without having course to refer to texts for correct usage of these aspects of his/her mother tongue. Akindele and Adegbite (2004) say that the mother tongue has a variety which has the socio-cultural function of serving as the instrument of nationalism in a speech community or nation. It is a language which user employs in expressing their nationalistic spirit. It is a language in which people should take pride in such as the case of English language in England.

National development can be considered as multi dimensional phenomenons which encompass the economic, social, political and technological factors. In Nigeria, the practice has been to measure it through economic dimensions such as growth in per capital income. I feel strongly that human angle has to be brought in, it in this respect that I would dwell on the issue of mother tongue on the improvement of standard of living, recognition of values, virtues by individual and social behaviours and access to job opportunities.

Statement of the problem: A preliminary survey of teachers' perception of the use and importance of the mother tongue among the Yorubas revealed that many people do not value the mother tongue like English language. It has come to a stage when Yoruba parents now give English names to their children. Such names as Blessing, Precious, Miracle. This is against the spirit of norms of the Yorubas because naming has a systemic pattern in Yorubaland. It reflects the family background, history, experience, religion and occupation. Teachers of these languages are complaining that the students do not develop much interest in learning of the mother tongue, while parents will not even bother to buy prescribed textbooks for their children.

Many students are leaving the primary school without being able to read and write in the mother tongue and even English language. Obanya (2004) quoting UNICEF source says that the overall literacy rate has declined from 57% in 1990 to 49% in 2001 also the source says that as at year 2000, 45% of primary school age children were out of school. This is a worrisome situation because, Nigeria is harbouring a large number of illiterates. This means that the Nigerian illiterate population will be deficient in using literacy in the mother tongue to function in the area of economic development, occupations which require at least minimal level of literacy, politics and communication. Also these categories of people may find it difficult to improve their standard of living as a result of poverty. Based on the problems stated above, the following general questions were generated to guide the study.

Will literacy in mother tongue lead to improvement in standard of living of Nigerians?

- What are the general advantages of literacy in the mother tongue?
- Will literacy in the mother tongue enhance values, virtues and social behaviours of Nigerians?
- Will literacy assist in preserving our cultural heritage?

Research questions: As a result of the problems stated above, the following research questions were formulated.

- Will there be any improvement in the standard of living of Nigerians if literacy in the mother tongue is acquired?
- Will there be any difference in the practice of political development, social behaviour if Nigerians are literate in their mother tongue?
- Will there be any improvement in access to lucrative occupation and employment if Nigerians acquire literacy in the mother tongue?

Research hypotheses: The following research hypotheses were formulated from the research questions stated above. The hypotheses are significant at 0.05 level.

- There is no significant difference in the standard of living of Nigerians who are literate in the mother tongue and those who are not.
- There is no significant difference in the practice of politics social behaviour among those who are literate in mother tongue and those who are not.
- There is no significant difference in access to occupation by those who are literate in their mother tongue and those who are not.

Literature review: Literacy in any language has numerous advantages and it has degree. Any country where majority of the citizens only acquire a minimal level of literacy will not be able to join the industrialized world. For a country to be tagged developed, such a country must have a greater percentage of literate citizens who have attained functional literacy level. Functional literacy level will enable the individual not only to read and write but calculate, manipulate complex machine, communicate proficiently, think critically, function efficiently and effectively in any environment and use the language to communicate efficiently in any environment. Eziokojiaku (2002) states that all learning is more meaningful, more effective and more creative when it is conducted in the mother tongue. The implication of the above is that during this technological age, especially when inventions arise, people will understand the use and importance of materials that are invented if they were written in the indigenous languages. For instance, in health sector, instructions about the use of medicine, dosage and contraindications would be understood better by people when written in the indigenous languages.

Language is closely related to culture. Culture according to BBC English Dictionary (1992) consists of the ideas, customs, activities civilization and art produced in a particular society. Mother tongue literacy will help to preserve our cultural practices such as values, norms, ethics and social behaviour.

It is a common knowledge that Nigerian parents usually emphasize virtues and life-skills in the course of the upbringing of their children. Some of these are, according to Obanya (2004) are religion and spiritual development, socialization which embraces the internalization of the ways of life of our people and ensuring that we are able to fit into society physically and mentally in social growth and survival. Others are hard work and the development of a strong insistence that one preserves when things become difficult. Mother tongue

literacy will help to preserve our cultural practices such as values, norms, ethics and social behaviours. It will also go a long way to instill in Nigerians, virtues and life skills especially those who are literate in mother tongue but cannot go beyond that level.

Awobuluyi (1996) says that the government came to see the indigenous languages more clearly for what they had all along been that is a veritable and practical means of communication, some of which could very easily be harnessed for effecting national integration. This led to the policy pronouncements on the teaching of indigenous languages in the National policy on Education (2004) that in the Junior Secondary School (JSS) which is of three years' duration, the child must study three languages, his mother tongue (if available for study) or an indigenous language of wider communication in the area of domicile. Also at the Senior Secondary School (SSS), which also lasts three years', the child must study two languages that are indigenous languages and English Language.

This policy failed because of many problems that hinder its implementation. Some of the problems are lack of teachers in the indigenous languages and lack of interest on the part of parents and students.

In the contemporary Nigeria society, many indigenous languages are coded for use in and outside the school. The schools complement the education given to children at home. Many books written in the mother tongue exploit the Nigerian culture. There are stories, poems and materials on religion and politics which will help readers to identify with their tradition in these areas. It is observed that stories, poems, folklores written are usually treated to bring out moral lessons and traditional sanctions on deviants.

In addition to the above, languages generally have variations between communities. Nigeria is a multi-lingual nation where about 400 indigenous languages are spoken, Emanajo (1999). There are variations among these language communities because of the results of different histories, leading to differences of culture. People born into them inherit different act sets of meanings, conflicting standards and different life styles. The patterns of behaviour which evolve are inevitably expressed in different linguistic usage. The advantage of literacy in the mother tongue will enhance the individuals ability to read and understand the culture and life styles of his community and others in his country. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for promulgating some statements about mother tongue in the Nigeria National Policy on Education (2004) that:

- The medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community.

- Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English.
- In selecting two Nigerian languages, students should study the language of their own area in addition to any of the three main Nigerian languages, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba, subject to availability of teachers.

The implication of the above statements is that Nigerian government has not made any specific policy on the mother tongue. It is true that the government recognizes the mother tongue but the statements are not implemented in the school. The statement on the chosen of 2 Nigerian languages is pessimistic and not emphatic because it includes a clause subject to availability of teachers.

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) recognizes the importance of the mother tongue, yet it makes a weak policy statement when it says that “the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore”. A close observation reveals that no adequate arrangements have been made and the National Assemblies are still using English language for their deliberations.

Language is an important factor to be considered when talking about the people’s standard of living because it defines the reality of a people’s environment and mode of existence. In order to convince an average Nigerian about the need to eat balance diet with even meager resources, one will do it better in the native languages. When a literate person is able to read literature written in his mother tongue about health and nutrition, his knowledge will increase and perhaps a positive change of attitude towards his health and nutrition. It is of note that health is wealth.

Pray (1995) says that no nation has developed in a sustain and democratic fashion on the basis of borrowed or colonial language. Pray observes that underdeveloped countries in Africa remain underdeveloped partly on account of the cultural alienation which is structured in the context of the use of colonial languages. Politics in Nigeria is full of bitter experiences, full of rigging of elections, violence and corruption. One of the factors responsible for these vices is that the bulk of the masses are illiterate and those who are literate in the mother tongue has no access to literacy that can enlighten them about their rights on election matters. The politicians who reached these people through posters did so by using English language which the majority of the voters cannot read and understand.

Bassey (2002) observes that if Africa is to move forward educationally and developmentally and if we can take knowledge and modern science to masses in their own languages, then in all likelihood the developmental transformation of Africa will be well grasped and achieved. The summary of this is that if a literate person in the mother tongue is exposed to research findings for example in agriculture or any other occupation, the person can utilize the research findings to improve his productivity. This will mean a healthy development for the nations economic growth. In addition it will lead to having additional income which will raise his standard of living because of increase in purchasing power.

Exposure to literature written in the mother tongue will enable the reader to acquire knowledge in many fields in addition to reading as a means of entertainment. Folklores, drama, proverbs and poetry written in the mother tongue have something to teach the reader. Some of the stories written in the mother tongue have their themes woven around human figure, animals, survival tactics, struggle between good and bad, abstract qualities like justice, patience and endurance.

Others are episode in life cycles like birth, initiation rites, marriage and death. Some tales condemn pride, laziness, lawlessness and violence in their morals. Some promote moral principles and industry such as love, trust and friendship while some condemn vices like hatred, deceit, guilt, corruption and treachery. With the above, one concludes that literacy in the mother tongue is capable of promoting national development in its entire ramification.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research method: The research design for this study is a descriptive research of the survey type. The research is descriptive as the investigator determined the extent to which literacy in the mother tongue will influence the notional development in Nigeria. A survey research studies large population to discover the relative incidents, distribution and interrelationships of sociological variable. Therefore, survey research provides appropriate conceptual and methodological design for investigating the problems of the study.

The population: The population of the study is the Yoruba language teachers in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Yoruba language is spoken in 6 states located in the South-West Nigeria namely, Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, Lagos, Osun and Ekiti.

Samples and sampling technique: The sample for this study was 220 subjects. This comprised civil servant, teachers, traders, drivers, artisans and farmers. Stratified random sampling technique was used to select the subjects in each of the local governments in Ekiti State.

Instruments: The main instrument used for the study is a structured questionnaire which contains 25 items. The questionnaire was constructed by the researcher and validated by language education specialists. The questionnaire chart information on the influence of the mother tongue on the standard of living of individuals, health, occupation, economics, politics, job opportunities and peaceful co-existence. It also elicits information on the academic background of the subjects.

The reliability of the instrument was established through test and retest method. The reliability co-efficient obtained after subjecting the data to Pearson Product Moment Correlation was 0.65 which was considered good enough for the study.

Data Administration: The researcher personally visited the respondents in their various schools and administered the questionnaires on them. The respondents were encouraged to fill the questionnaires and submit them the same day. They were also interviewed in a face to face interaction. The questionnaire uses likert rating scales, strongly agreed 4, agreed 3, strongly disagreed 2 and agreed 1 and was analysed and subjected to t-test statistics.

RESULTS

H₁: This states that there is no significant difference in the standard of living of Nigerians who are literates in the mother tongue and those who are not. The result of the data generated is shown on the Table 1.

Table 1 shows the results of the data analysed, the t-calculated is 3.10 while, the table value is 1.96. The t-calculated is greater than the table value therefore the hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is significant difference between the standard of living of those who are literate in the mother tongue and those who are not.

H₂: It states that there is no significant difference between the attitudes of those who are literate in Yoruba to politics and those who are not. The hypothesis is tested for significance at 0.05 level.

Table 2 shows that the t-calculated is 2.66 which is greater than the table value 1.96. The level of significance

Table 1: Difference between standard of living of a literate and non literate person in the mother tongue

Variable	N	Mean	Std.	df.	t-cal	t-val	Sig.
Literacy in mother tongue literate	220	12.24	3.10	219	3.20	1.96	0.002
Non literate	220	11.30	3.01				

p<0.05

Table 2: Difference between the attitude of those who are literate in Yoruba to politics and those who are not

Variable	N	Mean	Std.	df.	t-cal	t-val	Sig.
Literate	220	11.85	34.1	219	2.66	1.96	0.008
Non literate	220	10.95	3.17				

Table 3: Assess to Occupation

Variable	N	Mean	Std.	df.	t-cal	t-val	Sig.
Literate	220	12.4	219	219	2.98	1.96	0.003
Non literate	220	11.29	3.02				

is 0.008. The hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a significant difference between the attitude of those who are literate in Yoruba to politics and those who are not.

H₃: It states that there is no significant difference between access to occupation by those who are literate in the mother tongue and those who are not.

Table 3 shows that the results of the data analysed yielded 2.98 as t-calculated while the table value is 1.96. This shows that there is a significant difference between those who are literate in the mother tongue and accessibility to occupation.

DISCUSSION

The data analysed in respect of hypothesis one shows that there is significant difference between the standard of living of those who are literate in their mother tongues and those who are not. The implication of this is that those who are literate in the mother tongue have access to information on their health, keep records of their business, read about inventions when written in their mother tongues, read instruction that can promote their occupation, get employment more easily than those who are not literate, read about the advantages of eating balance diet, how to use medical prescription among many others. This finding corroborates the assertion made by Eziekeojiaku (2002) that all learning is more meaningful, more effective and more creative when it is conducted in the mother tongue.

A nation with healthy citizen and literate citizens will not find it difficult to develop economically because health is wealth. A literate person in the indigenous language other than his mother tongue will have advantage of interacting with the speakers of the

language outside his geographical location. He can engage in commerce with people from different speech communities as he has the means of communicating either through speech or writing. The 2nd hypothesis also indicated that there is significant difference in the understanding of political developments, social behaviours among those who are literate in the mother tongue and those who are not. This findings corroborates the claim of Obanya (2004) that Nigerian parents teach their children in the mother tongue life skills which usually entail the understanding of African ways of life and that people are able to fit into the society in all ramification.

The implication of this is that, those who are literate in their mother tongue and other language of their immediate environment have the advantages of reading about their culture and culture of people in their neighbourhood. They can read political manifestoes when written in local languages.

In addition they will be able to read about their own culture, collect information on it which is an added advantage to the oral rendition which they might have heard from the adults. These findings also corroborate the assertion of Obanya (2004) that literacy enables the individual to read about his or her culture. The implication is that a literate person can read about his culture and that of other people around him and will be able to compare culture traits. Such a person will have a better understanding of his culture. A literate person will read about political developments around him in books and newspapers written in his mother tongue or other indigenous languages. This will enable him to have better understanding. He might not be easily taking in by politicians. He will be able to identify and understand political trends and take necessary decisions.

Literacy in the mother tongue will enable citizens to identify anti-social behaviours and read about any campaign that will persuade people to shun such bad behaviours like rigging during election and other vices that are inimical to the development of the nation.

The 3rd hypothesis tested whether there is a significant difference between those who are literate in their mother tongue and those who are not in getting employment or being engaged in skillful employment. The findings from the data generated shows that those who are literate in their mother tongues are easily employed in both jobs that required skills. It also shows that some of those interviewed confessed that they read newspapers where they learnt a lot about things that are related to their occupation, learn about modern ways of doing things and were able to keep records of their business.

The findings corroborate the view of Bassey (2002) that if Africans were exposed to modern science and technology in their own languages, there is likelihood that the transformation of Africa will be well grasped and achieved.

Literacy in the mother tongue will promote mutual understanding, shaped moral standard and create good atmosphere that can lead to industrial peace. It is in this light that the nation can be at peace and attract industrialists and get developed.

CONCLUSION

From the findings of the study, it is concluded that literacy in the mother tongue is desirable because of the numerous advantages that it can bring. It is important for industrial development as it will provide manpower for industries in addition to helping the individuals to improve functionally in their occupation therefore contribute more meaningfully to the economic growth of their country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the findings from the study, it is recommended that the Nigerian government should encourage her citizens to be literate in their mother tongue. The teaching of the mother tongue should be made compulsory in the primary schools and learning additional. Nigeria language should be made compulsory in the primary and secondary schools. Above all, the government should take steps which will lead to the use of one of the Nigerian languages as a national language.

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