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## **Revisiting the Language Factor in Education in Nigeria: The Peculiar Case of Simultaneous Bilinguals and Asymmetric Bilinguals**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores language policy implications of the emergence in Nigeria, of children whose language acquisition sequences do not follow the mother-tongues-first order, which current language policy guidelines are based on. Current guidelines (which favour mother tongue education at primary education level), leverage on psycholinguistic and learning advantages of mother tongues education, giving the assumption that children would have developed appreciable mastery of their mother tongues at school age. Using an analytical approach, this article assesses cogent secondary data and posits that children who do not follow the mother-tongue-first order, and instead are simultaneous bilinguals and asymmetric bilinguals, have become significant components of Nigeria's population. The article highlights the psycholinguistic peculiarities of these emergent groups, pointing

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out their peculiar learning characteristics, and arguing that they usually do not possess the mastery of mother tongue, which makes mother tongue education advantageous. In this regard, the article suggests that official policy on language of education in Nigeria must henceforth accommodate variations according to sociolinguistic peculiarities of different locales. Finally, the article recommends that accurate statistics of language use among Nigerian children is required particularly in urban cosmopolitan areas, as this is an essential precursor to any meaningful update of existing language of instruction policy.

**Keywords:** Bilinguals, Mother-tongue, English, Language Policy, Indigenous Languages

## **1. Introduction**

The matter of the role of indigenous languages in formal contexts, especially in the realm of education, is one of the most intensely interrogated aspects of language study in Nigeria. The adoption of English as official language and the dominance of English in education are colonial legacies which irk the average language scholar not only on account of how anomalous and belittling the situation is, but also on account of the cognitive limitations associated with the use of a foreign tongue as language of instruction. This cognitive limitation particularly characterise Nigerians who communicate with their different native languages in their home settings and other non-formal context, only to be taught in English in school. The trajectory of the discourse on this issue has been in the direction of espousing the relative advantages of mother tongue (MT) instruction as well as the imperative of enhancing the status of indigenous languages relative to English in the English as Second language (ESL) context (Ogbonna, 2007; Trudel, 2018). In this

regard, the evolution of policy on language education in Nigeria has centered around the challenge of establishing lasting and practically beneficial roles for indigenous languages, particularly from the perspective of the perceived cognitive benefits and the attendant learning advantages of using them as languages of instruction in schools. All these are largely hinged on the understanding that English is more often than not a language which children encounter subsequent to their acquisition of their MT. This sequence of acquisition naturally positions a child to learn better when knowledge is delivered in the MT in which the child is naturally more competent. Apparently, it is believed that delivering lessons in a language the child is more familiar with eliminates the possibility that the child would encounter challenges engendered by having to struggle between disparate systems of conceptualisation (Are, 2020). Several attempts have therefore been made, and several efforts are still being made to practically implement measures that will properly establish MT education in Nigeria. These have been fraught with severe practical challenges ranging from poor funding, shaky political will, challenges with the multiplicity of languages and so on.

This situation is now being further complicated as the sociolinguistic structure of the country evolves. Pertinent in this regard is the fact that English has gradually shifted in role, and is increasingly being used in the homes and being acquired at childhood either alongside Nigerian languages or even alone (Onochie 1997, Are 2013, Ajepe & Ademowo 2016, Ayoola & Soneye 2016, Ahmed & Daniels 2019). For the category of children involved, (simultaneous bilinguals and asymmetric bilinguals respectively) classroom instruction in indigenous languages would be patently impractical and counterproductive from the perspective of learning

efficiency because these children (as explained in a subsequent part of this article) are often more competent in English than in their MTs or indigenous languages.

In view of the fact that the dominant sway of literature on language choice in Nigerian education is still tilted toward advocacy for the use of indigenous languages, a pertinent question requires answers: what would be the fate of the simultaneous bilinguals and asymmetric bilinguals in situations where the existing policies prescribing use of MTs as languages of instruction are implemented for preprimary and early primary education?

This article attempts to interrogate this question by presenting an analytical overview of existing perspectives, providing insights into the emerging sociolinguistic profiles of cosmopolitan urban settings in Nigerian, presenting appropriate and relevant information, and drawing conclusions and recommendations on the bases of an analytical appraisal of the facts.

## **2. Language and Educational in Nigeria: Mother Tongue Versus English**

The advantages of MT education are clear and incontrovertible, all things being equal. There appears to be very little basis for any contrary opinion regarding that, though there are challenges of implementation over which several concerns have been raised (These concerns will be addressed later in this article). Regardless of the challenges, there has been consistent clamour for the use of MT as language of instruction in Nigeria, at least at the primary school level, particularly the preschool and early primary level. Several reasons are often given to back up the advocacies. Ogbonna (2007) presents a succinct overview of the pro MT education arguments. He points

out that the most critical issue often raised is that there is a need for linguistic continuity which is guaranteed when the language of instruction in the school happens to be the same as that of the home. Using a different language for school instruction undermines the child's learning as "...the child cannot learn basic facts and concepts until he has understood the foreign language in which those facts and concepts are expressed... Consequently, the child relies on rote learning since he or she cannot understand the facts and ideas expressed in the foreign language" (p. 224).

Therefore, using the MT will be psychologically and sociologically beneficial to the child. From the psychological standpoint, there are cognitive advantages in learning in a language that is already fully acquired. From the sociological standpoint Ogbonna (2007) points out the fact that instruction in a L2 "...educates the child outside his or her culture, fails to relate education to the child's immediate environment, and erects a barrier between the child and his or her home" (p.225)

As previously mentioned, there are a number of challenges that hamper the implementation of MT education. One of such challenges is the fact that the MT may be a language that is disadvantaged in terms of material development. This makes the adoption of such a language as mode of instruction impractical. In addition to this, the low societal status of the MT relative to English often discourages schools and parents from opting for MT education. Possession of competence in English is often associated with upward mobility in society, thereby engendering strong preference for English. Most importantly, Nigeria is heavily multilingual. It is believed that there are over five hundred languages in Nigeria. A robust MT education drive may overwhelm the education system,

and inspire acrimonious and politically charged agitations by members of some linguistic groups for the inclusion of their languages as languages of instruction. Yet, it is impractical and unnecessary to include five hundred languages as languages of instruction. The prospect for petty squabbles along ethnolinguistic lines constitute a real discouragement for government as far as the implementation of MT education is concerned. These challenges have largely hampered implementation of national policy on language in education. They have also truncated the outcome of various pilot programmes towards MT education over the years. such as the Primary Education Improvement Project of 1970, the Six Year Primary Project, also of 1970, the Obolo Bilingual Education Project of 1985, and twelve others, all cited in Trudell (2018). Most importantly, these challenges have largely informed some policy summersaults on the part of government. Trudell (2018:24) aggregates and summarised the views of language experts regarding the consistent failure of MT education initiatives in Nigeria thus:

... there was universal acknowledgement that implementation of the policy provisions is highly problematic. The lack of teaching and learning materials in Nigerian languages, the practice of English-medium assessment, inadequate teacher capacity, inadequate written-language development of hundreds of Nigeria's languages, multilingualism in Nigerian society and classrooms, and a lack of awareness of the policy requirements were all mentioned many times in the discussions. Concern was also expressed that the language policy discussion has more of a political character than a pedagogical one.

### **3. The Evolution of Language Policy in Education in Nigeria**

There is actually no comprehensive law in Nigeria detailing policy on language use. However, there are a number provisions on several government educational statutes which provide guidance on matters relating to language choice and use. In this regard, what scholars often refer to as the language policy in education are the various guidelines on language use and language teaching, scattered in the National Policy on Education (NPE) document. All these provisions have evolved over the years. An overview of the salient aspect of all the changes must precede any meaningful discussion of contemporary matters in Language of education in Nigeria.

Western education came into Nigeria via missionary activities and later by the combined efforts of missionaries and colonial authorities. Although, English was the dominant language used, the missionaries had a policy of encouraging the use of indigenous languages as language of instruction. They reasoned that since their ultimate goal was to spread Christianity, it was expedient to engage the people in their own languages (Awobuluyi, n.d. ). As early as 1927, the colonial authorities also upheld the value of educating people in their own languages. That was why the British Advisory Committee on Native Education in Tropical Africa recommended the use of indigenous languages as medium of instruction in the lower years of primary education in their African colonies (Ibrahim & Gwandu, 2016). This objective proved unattainable due to several factors mainly related to earlier mentioned challenges of implementation and low status of the indigenous languages relative to English which was and is still the language associated with upward social mobility. Inevitably, English dominated the school system during the colonial period.

At independence, there were spirited agitations for the use of indigenous languages in national life including education. This culminated into provisions in the 1977 NPE recognising four language categories: MT, language of the immediate environment, major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), English and other international languages (Okonkwo, 2016). This categorisation was apparently done to enhance clear systematic role allocation. Essentially, several policy statements regarding language were enshrined in the 1977 document (Okonkwo,

2016). However, the one that is of immediate relevance to this study is the requirement that the first three years of primary education shall be conducted in the MT or the language of the immediate environment, with English taught as subject. Other laws toward encouraging the study of indigenous languages included the requirement that pupils in junior and senior secondary schools should choose one out of the major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) for study as a subject (Ibrahim & Gwandu, 2016).

In spite of some rather minor and somewhat cosmetic adjustments, these same basic tenets survived the various revisions of the NPE (1981, 1989, 2004, and 2007), until 2013 when a revised version was published containing fundamentally different elements which indicated a new underlying philosophy regarding the place of languages hitherto designated as major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba). The laws requiring pupils and students at secondary school level to learn one of these three major languages were expunged from the policy document, probably in response to agitation about marginalisation from speakers of minority languages. However, the



document retained provisions that were based on the doctrine which holds that MT education was preferable to English remained, implying that the policy makers continued to work on the simple notion that children would have acquired their MTs or languages of the immediate environment before English; hence they would benefit from the cognitive advantages of learning in those MTs or languages of the immediate environment.

The questions which forms the basis of the current enquiry inevitably comes to mind at this point. There is a need to ascertain the extent to which children in contemporary Nigeria would have mastered their MTs before attending school. Once again, one must emphasise the fact that such mastery would be the only rationale for encouraging school instruction in MT. If indeed there are sizeable numbers of children who do not possess reasonable competence in their MTs at the time of attending school, would MT education policies still be valid across board? This brings to mind the need to x-ray language acquisition patterns in Nigeria and the attendant patterns of MT/English bilingualism that exist. This is done in the next section.

#### **4. Simultaneous Bilingualism and Asymmetric Bilingualism in the context of MT and English in Nigeria**

Today the number of children who come to preschool classes or enroll for early primary education without any appreciable competence in any Nigerian language has become significant, as attested to by studies such as Odumuh (1981), Onochie (1997), Are (2013), Ajepe & Ademowo (2016), Ayoola & Soneye (2016), and Ahmed & Daniels (2019). In the early days of colonialism, people

came in contact with English in the school system. But in the words of Are (2013:13),

... things are changing, with the colonial (now ex-colonial) languages becoming very present in different social situations (including some homes), such that local varieties of these languages have emerged and are increasingly been encountered and acquired outside the school system

Indeed, Ajepe & Ademowo (2016:13) are of the opinion that “English language therefore becomes the first language of most children” [sic]. Although the claim that *most* children are affected could most likely be an exaggeration, there is no doubt that the phenomenon has become very widespread. Unfortunately, there are no credible statistics regarding the exact number of people in this category. In this regard, Ayoola & Soneye (2016) provide a data driven insight into the phenomenon, albeit on a small localised scale. Their submission offers fresh insights into the possible scale of the phenomenon not as an enumeration of the number of children who use English as L1, but as an insight into the dimensions of the acquisition and usage of English outside the school. The said study is based on the observation, by the researchers, that a sizeable number of children of preschool and primary school age communicate in English and not in their indigenous languages. The researchers set out to study the nature and reason for the observed preference for English, focusing on three Yoruba cities (Lagos, Ibadan and Ile-Ife). It is interesting that the researchers report (among several other findings) that 70% of parents admitted that they used both English and their MT to communicate with their children at home and that their children’s favourite television programmes were broadcast in

English. Also, 68.5% of parents responded that English was used for teaching their children in churches and mosques. Apparently as a consequence of this, 87.5% of the concerned children speak English instead of Yoruba while at play with their peers in the community. The implication of these was that 75% of these children were more fluent in English than Yoruba. The situation is clearly similar in the Igbo speaking parts of the country. As Ahmed and Daniel (2019:106-107) posit,

Igbo families of today try to be more English than the Queen of England herself and so we find out that children of such homes, though born and bred in Igbo land, cannot speak the Igbo Language at home or even in schools.

One must point out the fact that the tendency to rely more on English for home communication applies more to families in urban areas of Southern Nigeria and the Middle Belt, where historically, attitudes to English have been favourable. Families in the rural areas of the South and most of the North have not been reported to exhibit this tendency (Danladi, 2013). This means that in the North of Nigeria, reliance on MT and the language of immediate environment (Hausa) is still the dominant trend, and contact with English still largely commence as school experience for many. Attitudes to English have not been too positive in the North due to complex historical factors verging mainly on religion and the attendant historical tendency of the Muslim majority to view English as the language of expansionist Christian colonialists, who plotted the replacement of Arabic and Ajami writing (Hausa written in Arabic scripts) by English (Are & Adamo, 2019).

The implication of all the above for this article is that the apparent increase in the number of homes where children acquire English from the home setting, has produced two additional categories of indigenous language (MT)/English bilinguals: simultaneous bilinguals and asymmetric bilinguals. These two categories have been added to the traditional symmetrical pattern characterised by the acquisition of MT before English. The simultaneous bilinguals acquire the MTs and English side by side, with English being dominant, while the asymmetric bilinguals acquire English first and may later go on to acquire their MTs. It is clear from this situation that the underlying assumption behind the requirement for MT instruction in the NPE (which is that pupils would already speak their MTs before enrolling at school) is no longer a wholly applicable assumption. It is applicable in some parts of Nigeria while it is no longer applicable in other parts. This is a critical sociolinguistic detail which the NPE does not take into cognisance.

This article posits that the emergence of huge numbers of English-dominant simultaneous bilinguals and asymmetric bilinguals is throwing another major challenge into the fray of previously mentioned problems that have bedeviled policy initiatives towards MT based instruction in primary schools in Nigeria as stipulated in the NPE. This emergent challenge is not simply a challenge of implementation. It is a challenge that raises a fundamental question about the appropriateness and relevance of the policies in question to a huge number of Nigerian children. This indeed could be a credible basis for policy review. Towards this, the exact ways each type of bilinguals can be impacted by the NPE

stipulations need to be itemised clearly as done in the following section.

### **5. MT Instruction among Different Categories of MT/English Bilinguals in Nigeria**

For the purpose of emphasis, it must be noted that the above explication identifies three categories of MT/English bilinguals that can be found in varying proportions in Nigeria. The proportion would depend on whether the context is rural or urban; Northern or Southern (as previously espoused). Inevitably, MT instruction would have varying impacts on the different categories.

For the first category (those who acquire their MTs at home and subsequently learn English in school but use their MT for day to day interaction), the value of MT instruction in preschool education and early primary education is immense as previously discussed in this article. Children in the Northern parts of Nigeria appear to be predominantly in this category in view of the relatively low penetration of English into Northern Nigerian society as espoused in Taiwo (2009) and Danladi (2013).

The second category involves the simultaneous bilinguals who acquire both their MT and English simultaneously. It is important to reiterate the previously stated fact that English appears to be often dominant among Nigerian children in this category as evidenced in Ayoola & Soneye (2016). This implies that the children concerned are more comfortable speaking in English, and (by implication) are likely to be more comfortable receiving instruction in English. It is hard to imagine how instruction in MT would be of great benefit to these children with regard to their immediate learning experiences. On the long run however, instruction in MT could

reposition the MT, turning it into their dominant language, thereby contributing to the cherished ideal of improving the status of indigenous languages relative to English.

The third category consists of children who acquire only English from the home, and may later go on to acquire their MTs. Although this pattern is atypical in L2 contexts when non indigenous languages are involved, it is increasingly becoming significant not only in Nigeria but in other African societies as well. Indeed, as far back as the 1980s, Kwofie (1989) identified this trend in French speaking West African countries. Clearly, MT instruction would absolutely alienate children in this category. The NPE provisions on the use of MT as language of instruction in preschool and early primary education would therefore be patently out of place for these children.

Perhaps, it can be argued that the NPE provisions have the long run capacity to enhance the status of indigenous languages, and to that extent there may be no need for any major review. It is also possible to raise the cultural argument, and insist that English is alien to the cultural experiences of children in category two and three, and as such forcing them to learn in MT would be beneficial. The point must still be made that in the first place the immediate learning experience of children cannot be improved via instruction in any language in which they struggle, even if that language is their MT, given the fact that language use and the attendant cognitive processes do not respect ancestry. Regarding the cultural argument, one must point out the fact that the English which Nigerian children speak is not the culturally alien English of England or any other foreign English speaking society. It is a culturally adapted English that has

undergone several processes of adjustment to conform it to the Nigerian context.

Clearly, the cases of simultaneous bilinguals and asymmetric bilinguals must be somehow factored into any future review or update of the NPE. In spite of the absence of precise figures, there is little doubt about the fact that the number of children falling into these categories has become demographically significant as espoused in Odumuh (1981), Onochie (1997), Are (2013), Ajepe & Ademowo (2016), Ayoola & Soneye (2016), and Ahmed & Daniels (2019). There is every possibility that this number is on the increase.

## **6. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The essence of the above submission is to highlight the fact that in the emerging sociolinguistic picture of many Southern urban cosmopolitan areas of Nigeria where large numbers of children are growing up acquiring English alongside their MTs, and some (unfortunately) are growing up acquiring only English, the policy of MT education may not necessarily offer the expected learning edge. The challenge is that the concerned children often lack the prerequisite competence in their MTs in the first place.

The major implication of this is that a one-strategy-fits-all approach to language in education may no longer be feasible in Nigeria. Different parts of the country have different sociolinguistic peculiarity and attendant differences in the psycholinguistic profiles of children. In these situations, language needs are not uniform. Therefore, policies cannot be uniform. The policy documents on language in education must therefore make provision for diverse approaches which educators in different locales may adopt as required according to informed discretion. Whatever these options

are, they must factor in the need to enhance literacy development and educational roles for indigenous languages.

It is recommended therefore that the current policy which prescribes conducting early primary education in MT (while English is introduced as a subject) can be retained only in places where children of school age often are generally known to be competent in their MTs, or a demographically dominant and acceptable language of the immediate environment. Fortunately, the idea of a language of immediate environment is often applicable in the Northern parts and several parts of the Middle Belt where preschool MT competence is still generally the norm. However, the factor of acceptability may not always be guaranteed due to political factors. Where persuasion fails towards the use of a language of the immediate environment, local solutions must be allowed. It is however important to note that where MT is used as language of instruction in early primary education, switching to English as language instruction at later stages is important for ease of conducting uniform national examinations due to the logistic nightmare that could emerge if same examination materials are to be produced in myriads of languages.

For areas where MT/English simultaneous bilingualism as well as asymmetric acquisition of English/MT hold sway, it seems inevitable that the language which is dominant in terms of competence levels should be the language of instruction in early education. This, unfortunately, is often English (as earlier cited studies reveal). In this situation, the MT should be taught as a subject where possible (depending levels of material development). Alternatively, a dual language policy involving literacy skills and content instruction in two languages may be workable if deemed feasible by the school authorities concerned based on informed



discretion. The dual language policy obviously would involve English and the MT or a vehicular indigenous language of the immediate environment, provided it is acceptable). In this case, there would of course be need for expert decisions on allocation plans to determine which languages go for which content area, how this would be done and at what stages.

One must stress the fact that the factor of acceptability raised in the foregoing recommendations, is mentioned because it is potentially a critical pitfall in the ethnic and politically charged, heavily multilingual terrain in which language and educational planners must often deftly navigate in Nigeria. In these situations, imposition could have dire consequences. One must therefore reiterate the fact that local circumstances must ultimately be allowed to dictate practices, provided the local authorities are made to (via regulatory action) ensure that indigenous languages are never entirely knocked out of the picture.

For the secondary education level, one possible way the indigenous language element could be retained across board would be to restore the now jettisoned policy of requiring children to choose a major Nigerian language of their choice as a subject at secondary school level. This time all languages in Nigeria that are functioning as vehicular languages in different zones should be included. In this regard, such languages as Efik, Fulfulde, Kanuri and so on will come into the fray. This will be of immense value toward developing indigenous languages particularly in the contexts of a need to enhance their roles in wider society and harnessing their value as repertoires of indigenous knowledge systems.

The addition of more languages to the options available will not necessarily douse agitations from members of groups whose

languages are not included (a situation which engendered the previous collapse of the policy). However, it is the duty of governments to deftly manage agitations of this sort, some of which may sometimes be frivolous or out rightly ludicrous.

One must concede the fact that the above perspectives and recommendations (which may even be better taken as mere suggestions) may only subsist as broad policy outlines. Detailed policy options can only be fashioned out painstakingly by competent persons based on professional and dispassionate assessment of local realities. Such persons must be equipped with appropriate and directly relevant demographic data. The National Bureau of Statistics must therefore include in its routine surveys, the critical matters of languages spoken by children in different locales and the way such languages are used in daily life.

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