

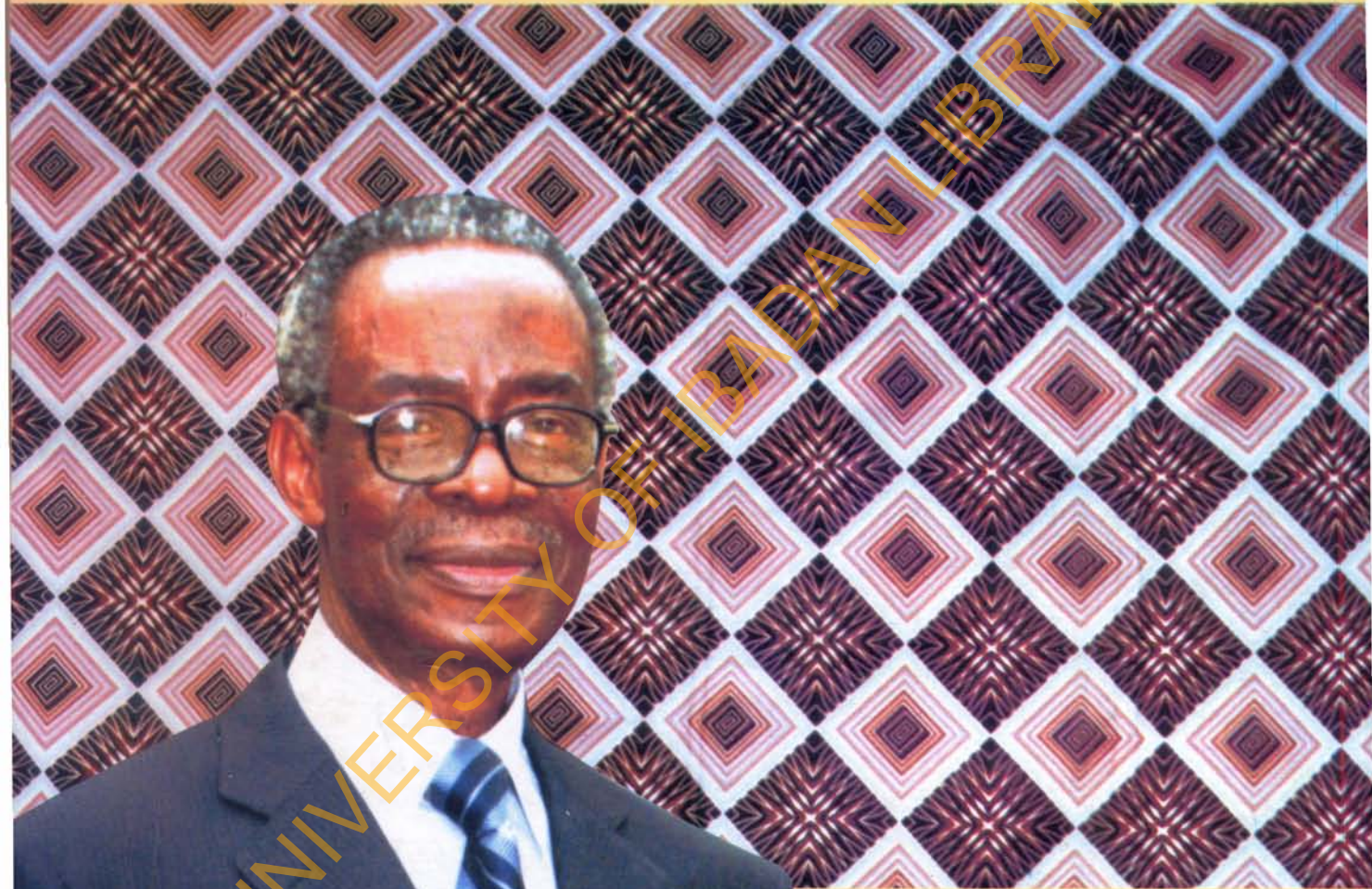
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NEW FINDINGS

IN THE STUDY OF

NIGERIAN LANGUAGES & LITERATURES

A festschrift in honour of **OLÁDÉLÉ AWÓBÙLÚYÌ**



Edited by:

Francis O. Oyebade
Temitope Olumuyiwa

**NEW FINDINGS IN THE STUDY OF
NIGERIAN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES**

A Festschrift in honour of Oladele Awobuluyi

**Edited by:
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Department of Linguistics & Languages (2010)
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ISBN: 978-978-912-020-8



Montem Paperbacks

27 Kolawole Street,
Oke-Aro Titun Qrts.
Akure,
Ondo State.

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REVISITING THE MOTHER-TONGUE MEDIUM CONTROVERSY IN NIGERIAN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

A number of studies carried out on 'Primary School Dropouts' in Nigeria and elsewhere attributed the dropout phenomenon (which ranges from 40% to 60%) in certain countries to premature introduction of English as a language of instruction at the primary school. In the National Policy on Education (Revised in 1981), the mother-tongue medium policy was clearly and unambiguously stated for the first time. Since then, several experiments have been carried out to prove the efficacy of mother tongue as medium of instruction in the primary school. Notable among these is the Ife Six-Year Yoruba Primary-Project (SYYP) 1970-1975. This study provides answers to the following questions: (i) Are the proprietors of Private Nursery and Primary Schools aware of the mother-tongue medium policy? (ii) What is their attitude towards it? (iii) To what extent is the policy statement adhered to? (iv) If the policy is not adhered to, what are the reasons given for not adhering to it? (v) What is the status of the so-called major languages and languages of the immediate community in these schools, that is, are they being taught as subjects? (vi) How many periods are allotted to them per week on the timetable, compared with exoglossic languages like English and French? (viii) What are the implications of all these on the so-called major languages of Nigeria and the languages of the immediate community? Answers to these questions form the basic thrust of this paper.

PREAMBLE

It is universally accepted that a child learns in his or her mother tongue. Yet, of all the continents and the peoples of the world, it is only in Africa and perhaps a few other ex-colonial countries that formal education is offered in a language that is foreign to the child. In Europe, USSR, China, North America and all other leading countries of the world, the child goes through his primary, secondary and university education in his own mother tongue, whereas in Africa South of the Sahara and North of the Limpopo, we educate our children practically in a foreign tongue from primary to post secondary level. (Fafunwa, 1977).

The Policy

The mother-tongue policy as outlined in the 1977 National Policy on Education applies to three levels of education:

1. At the Pre-Primary level, "The government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community.
2. At the primary level, the government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially (i.e primary 1-3) the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community (LIC) and, at a later stage (i.e. primary 4-6) English.
3. For Adult Education, the National Commission (for the Development of Adult Education) will work out the overall strategy for the inclusion of Nigerian Arts, culture and languages in Adult Education programmes.

It appears that the policy does not incorporate the secondary level of education, however, this is implied, since number two above states that at a later stage, that is primary IV-VI, the medium of instruction would switch to English. This means that the practice will continue through secondary education to tertiary level. Bamgbose (1977) opined that there is nothing novel about the policy and that it is only at the level of pre-primary education that the mother-tongue policy is an innovation. Most of the nursery schools are generally private schools where the emphasis is on teaching children English rather than Nigerian languages. Bamgbose rightly predicts that it would be difficult to see how the policy can be endorsed as long as pre-primary and primary education remains largely a monopoly of private fee paying schools.

The Prospects of Mother-Tongue Education

Olanrewaju (1991) draws attention to the potency of the mother-tongue as a medium of instruction which he says:

In Mathematics, Yoruba Language has adequate provisions for counting cardinal or ordinal numbers (e.g. ení, èjì, èta, èrin, àrún, èfà (1-6) etc fractions as well as the process of addition (iropo), subtraction (iyòkúrò), multiplication (isodipúpò), and division (pínpin). Although these can be called arithmetic processes, the language can also be used to teach the algebra, geometry, trigonometry and statistical components of Mathematics. (Olanrewaju 1991:93)

Proponents of mother-tongue education have optimistically discussed the prospects of education in the mother tongue. Some of these are summarized below. According to Owolabi (2006) education in the mother tongue generates respect and appreciation for the indigenous institutions. It facilitates and maximizes the effectiveness of transition and learning efforts. It facilitates easy transmission from home to school. It enhances the possibility of attaining the much-desired technological development the nation is striving to achieve. It affords the populace easy access to new discoveries and development in academics. It also facilitates political and social understanding in a country like Nigeria where ethnic discrimination or suspicion is in vogue, in other words it would promote unity in diversity. Moreover, language endangerment and extinction would be curbed.

The Problem

The Igbo language ... has restricted ways of translating physical phenomena: it does not have long established writing, not to talk of metalanguage, hence it suffers a dearth of adequate vocabulary for the generation of scientific thought and conceptualization... Abstract ideas and concepts in physics are readily written and expressed in English ... while there may be no substitutes or equivalents for scientific terms in Nigerian languages, which have not yet fully developed the terms for communicating ideas in physics... it can be perceived that the vernacular has limitations and lacks the semantic subtleties and nuances abundant in the English language in which scientific terms have been completely categorized (Nwokedi (1984)).

In considering the prospects of using Nigerian languages as a medium of instruction, there are some problems we must have to contend with; some of these problems are identified below.

Aderonmu (1991) identified three. These are non-availability of metalanguage, scarcity of textbooks in Nigerian languages and the dearth of personnel, that is competent teachers who could impart knowledge in Nigerian languages. Others that have been identified are the extremely multilingual nature of Nigeria as a country, the attitudinal disposition of policy makers, implementers and consumers of education who accord low prestige to education in mother-tongue, the level of development of the indigenous languages and the working class parents, who are transferred frequently (Bamgbose 1990).

Experiments in Mother-Tongue Education

One of the major objections raised against the policy of mother-tongue education is that the educational and psychological basis of the use of mother-tongue in early education has not been substantiated by experimentation. In response to this assertion, many experiments have been carried out by researchers to prove that there is some relationship between the use of mother-tongue and performance in class work. Two of such experiments are discussed here.

The Ife Six Year Yoruba Primary Project

The most remarkable one was the Ife Six-Year Yoruba Primary Project (SYYPP) conducted by Professor Aliu Babatunde Fafunwa and other researchers. The project took place at St. Stephen's Primary school, Ile-Ife between 1970-1975. The project was sponsored by the Ford Foundation. There were two classes of students, the experimental and the control group. The experimental classes of 40 pupils per class per year were taught using Yoruba as the medium of instruction from Primary i-iv, while English language was taught like any other subject by a specialist. The control classes of 40 pupils per class per year were taught in Yoruba during the first three years (i - iii) before switching to English in years (iv-vi) as medium of instruction, while Yoruba was also taught as one of the other subjects. The subjects covered in the study included social and cultural studies, science and Mathematics. The results of the project showed that children in the experimental classes could express themselves more fluently in English and Yoruba than those in the control classes. They also showed more evidence of self-reliance, resourcefulness and were relatively happier as a group when compared with the control group. Fafunwa et al (1981:141) capture the success of the project in when they state that the result of the project was:

...Strongly in favour of Mother-Tongue Education (MTE) as this has not been detrimental to the child's progress at higher levels... Apart from the academic achievement of these children, evidence has it that those of them who had turned to technical pursuit have proved more resourceful

than their counterparts from other schools whom they met on the technical plane. The SYYPP children have demonstrated greater manipulative ability, mutual dexterity and enhanced comprehension, all of which they had acquired at the primary school level through Mother-tongue as medium of instruction...

Unique features of the SYYPP

According to Fafunwa (2008: 5), about 140 books were published as a result of the project.

Pupils who participated in the project were more than 2000. Those children taught in Yoruba did much better in Science and Mathematics than their colleagues taught in English.

More of the experimental group were admitted into secondary school than the control group. The experimental group performed better in technical subjects and French language.

Illiterate parents participated in the teaching process. They handled the cultural, morals and home training aspects. They also told stories. The parents who participated were excited because they never thought they could be involved in teaching.

The Primary Education Improvement Project (Nigeria)

According to Omojuwa (1982), the Primary Education Improvement Project (PEIP) was conceived in 1969/70 and made operational in 1971 by Ahmadu Bello University Institute of Education, Zaria, in 66 selected schools in the Northern States of Nigeria. The project was jointly sponsored by the then six Northern Nigeria State Governments, the Federal Government of Nigeria, UNESCO and UNICEF. The underlying assumption of the project was that educational standards at the primary level would improve if:

- (a) the right types of instructional materials were produced, were supplied in sufficient quantity and at the right time to schools, and were appropriately used;
- (b) primary education curriculum content was made more relevant to the children's environment and more responsive to the demands of the modern world, and if this curriculum content was imparted to the learner in a language in which he could maximize his understanding and express his experiences (the learner's mother tongue).

Strategies

The means by which the project aims were to be carried out included the creation of subject panels in Lower Primary Teaching; Primary Mathematics; Primary Science; Languages – English and Hausa; Social Studies; Physical and Health Education; Cultural and Creative Activities – Art, Music, Drama.

Implementation

After sets of instructional materials (IMs) had been written by subject panels, mobile teacher trainers (MTTs) were invited to workshops at which both the writers and the MTTs would go through the new IMs, examining them in terms of their suitability and effectiveness for classroom purposes. The MTTs, each of whom was placed in charge of between four to six project primary classes, went back to their various bases with the IMs as approved. They in turn ran short courses for their own class teachers on the use of these IMs, which continued to be revised in the light of the feedback from class teachers and MTTs.

They visited their teachers every working day to assist with the use of these materials.

Taking account of the language situation in each of the six states covered by the project, the language planning adopted was as follows:

1. (a) Hausa as the language medium in the first 3 years and thereafter as a subject;
(b) English as a subject in the first 3 years, thereafter as the language medium;
(c) Arabic as an optional subject from the first to the sixth-year.
2. (a) English as the language medium from the beginning to the end of primary education;
(b) A Nigerian language as a subject, where possible;
(c) Arabic as an optional subject.

Outcomes

The pupils of the project classes compared to those in the controlled classes:

- (a) were more confident to talk about their experiences to both the teacher and one another;
- (b) achieved literacy faster in English, Hausa and Arabic as from their second year at school;
- (c) were more fluent users of both English and Hausa;
- (d) achieved numeracy and mathematical concepts faster;
- (e) were more aware of the events and phenomena in their immediate environments;
- (f) were more aware of the elementary laws of nature (scientific concepts).

Research Questions

In the light of the positive outcome of these research projects, this paper has six research questions, as outlined below:

- i. Are the proprietors of private nursery and primary schools aware of the mother-tongue medium policy?
- ii. What is their attitude towards the policy?
- iii. To what extent is the policy statement adhered to?

- iv. If answer to number iii is 'not at all' what are the reasons given for not adhering to it?
- v. What is the status of the so-called major languages and language of the immediate community in these schools?
- vi. How many periods are allotted to them per week on the time-table, compared to exoglossic languages like English and French?

Answers to these questions are provided descriptively and statistically.

Data Collection

The study was carried out in Ibadan metropolis. One hundred and ten private nursery and primary schools were visited in the city around June 2008. Thirty-five research assistants helped in obtaining data from the schools. The schools visited cut across all the local governments in the city.

Results

The results are presented below under each question.

Question 1: Are you aware of the mother-tongue medium policy?

Valid	Frequency	Percent
Yes	109	99.1
No	1	.9
Total	110	100.0

As shown in table 1 above, out of the 110 schools visited, 109 proprietors/proprietresses which constitute 99.1 percent indicated that they were aware of the policy.

Only 1, which constitutes .9% indicated that he was not aware of the policy statement. This shows that the policy is not secret to proprietors and proprietresses of private schools.

Question 2: How do you feel about the policy? Respondents were asked to indicate their attitude towards the policy by choosing either, 'good' or 'bad' to complete the question: 'The policy is ...' The table below shows their responses.

The policy is '_____'

Table 2

Valid	Frequency	Percent
Good	12	10.9
Bad	98	89.1
Total	110	100.0

As shown in table 2 above, only 12 proprietors indicated that the policy is good, while an overwhelming 98 of them were of the opinion that the policy was bad. This constitutes 89.1% of the total population of respondents.

Question 3: Do you use MT as medium of instruction as stipulated in the policy?

Table 3

Valid	Frequency	Percent
Yes	12	10.9
No	76	69.1
Somehow	22	20.0
Total	110	100.0

As reflected in table 3 above, 12 proprietors, which constitute only 10.9% of the population use MT or LIC, (which in this case is Yoruba) as medium of instruction as stipulated in the policy. 76 of them, which constitute 69.1% do not use MT or LIC at all. 22 of them, which constitute 20.0% only use MT occasionally.

Question 4: why do you find it difficult to adhere to the policy?

Respondents were given freedom to answer the above question in an open ended way. Below are some of the reasons given for not implementing the policy statement.

- i. This is an international school and we cannot afford to use a local language,
- ii. The policy is barbaric. We just can't adopt it.
- iii. If we try it, we will lose many of our customers
- iv. The government has no right to impose any language on us. This is a private school.
- v. This is a metropolitan city. Our pupils are from different linguistic backgrounds so using Yoruba, as the medium of instruction would be tantamount to using a foreign language to many of our pupils.
- vi. Only few of our teachers are competent speakers of Yoruba, the other ones do not even speak Yoruba at all, so they cannot use it as medium of instruction.
 - a. Using MT as medium of instruction would affect our pupils' mastery of English negatively.
 - b. Practising this policy would be tantamount to committing suicide. Parents would simply take their wards to other private schools.
 - c. We wanted to implement it, but majority of our customers simply threatened to take their wards away. So we backed out.
 - d. We want to practice it, but we are constrained. How do we get textbooks written in Yoruba language?
 - e. Using MT to teach in an age of civilization would be tantamount to committing mental lobotomy and swimming against the tide.
 - f. Yoruba language does not have the metalanguage to teach the sciences.

Question 5: Do you teach any indigenous language as subject in your school?

95% of our respondents claimed that they teach Yoruba language as a subject in their schools. In fact, 10 of the schools claimed that they teach the three

major languages of Nigeria (Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo) in their schools. They showed this on their time table. This is very commendable.

Question 6: How many periods do you allot to Nigerian languages on your time table?

Responses to this question range from 1 hour to 1 hour 20 minutes per week. Out of the total population, only 10 schools indicated that they teach Nigerian languages for 1 hr 20 mins per week. 75 of them teach Yoruba for 1 hour per week. The remaining 25 schools teach Yoruba for only 35 minutes per week. Compared with English, this is very lop-sided. English language is taught everyday for 35 minutes. While English literature is taught for three periods per week. A period is 35 minutes.

Implication of the Findings

The result of this research reveals that most proprietors of private nursery and primary schools suffer from linguistic imperialism. They still regard Nigerian languages as 'vernacular'. In fact, in all the schools visited, pupils are only allowed to speak Nigerian languages during the periods allotted to these languages in a week. Any pupil caught speaking Nigerian languages during the remaining periods is punished. Punishment ranges from paying a fine, doing hard work like weeding or fetching water to carrying slates hung around the neck with the inscription 'I am very stupid, I spoke vernacular in the school compound'. Our respondents revealed that students hardly fall victim of these punishments because they fear the humiliation associated with them, so they avoid breaking the regulation. Finally, the results presented above further confirm the impression that Nigerian languages are seriously deprived and threatened by English language.

Recommendations

The three tiers of government – Federal, State and Local Governments should be involved in enforcing the policy statement on all schools, public or private, this can be achieved by closing down schools that violate the policy.

Secondly, books on the other subjects should be published in the local languages. Those that were published during the SYYP and PEIP referred to above should be reviewed to suit the changes reflected in the curriculum.

Special incentives should be given to schools that go an extra mile to teach the three major languages of Nigeria - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

Finally, the success stories of mother-tongue medium, especially, the SYYP should be well publicised to convince parents that using the MT as medium of instruction is beneficial. If all these are done, our indigenous languages would be free from the threat of extinction. Our children would learn better and faster in a relaxed, conducive environment. Our indigenous cultures will be respected and appreciated.

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