

**LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION AND BASIC EDUCATION IN FOSTERING  
EARLY SCHOOL TEACHING AND LEARNING IN NIGERIA**

**Ifeanyichukwu Jeffrey CHISUNUM, Ph. D**

Faculty of Education,  
Department of Arts & Social Sciences  
University of Delta, (UNIDEL), Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria  
E-mail: jeffchisunum70@gmail.com

&

**Roselyn EBOH –NZEKWUE**

Department of Language and Communication,  
School of General Studies,  
Federal College of Education (Tech.) Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria

**Abstract**

*Research has long found out that the use of children's first/home languages is the most effective approach to teaching children to read and to write. In situations where the children's first language or mother tongue is not used for reading instruction, those who support improvement in reading can share benefits of a first language or native language based approach to reading instruction. It is in the context of this assumption, that this paper looks at the Nigerian language of instruction policy in the first three years of primary school education and suggests insistently that the immediate language of the people should form the bases of instruction and in places where many languages are used, a contextual analysis that includes language mapping is highly recommended for instruction to complement the success of Nigeria's goal for the focus of Education For All (EFA) and a realistic attainment of basic education as a global agenda by 2030.*

**Keywords:** Language of instruction, contextual analysis, language mapping, basic education, education for all.

**Introduction**

The desire of all countries of the world to reduce illiteracy, fight ignorance and encourage access to education even to the grassroots necessitated the need for Education for All (EFA) as stated in the United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2016). The need was to ensure that Education gets to every people and nations of the world. The first call could be traced back to 1948 which came with the universal Declaration of Human Rights and because education is perceived as a human right, it became imperative for its inclusion as one of the rights to be enjoyed by man (Maduabuchi, 2008).

In 1999, the Nigeria government introduced the universal Basic Education, a programme to provide free primary and secondary Education for all. This programme was created at improving education in the country. It was then perceived that the language or medium of instruction especially the early school years was paramount. Despite the fact that there has been some improvement in enrolment in recent years, its results have been limited and Nigeria's educational system still rates very poorly in most international rankings. The programme however, was not able to take off immediately after its launch as it did not have legal backing. Therefore, the initial UBE-related activities were carried out only in areas of social mobilization, infrastructural development, provision of instructional materials etc.

However, there has been some improvement considering the language of instruction and other improvement in education in Nigeria since the programme started but has been marginal considering its span or existence for almost two decades. While it is crucial that countries make an extra effort and institute special initiatives to target basic education, these endeavours will work only in the context of a broader focus on universal basic education for all children.

The 2030 Education Framework for Action commits all countries including Nigeria to ensure the provision of 12 years of free publicly funded equitable quality education, of which at least nine years are compulsory. The fact that the educational gaps for children especially girls are large, the problem for boys in the rural areas particularly those from poor backgrounds who are also dramatic in outlook. Efforts to get girls into schools will never be successful unless there is a decent quality education, reasonable class sizes which are dependent on infrastructure, furniture and learning

materials, trained teachers and quality instructional materials and a good language of instruction (UNESCO, 2016)

The educational gaps for girls are specially large, the problem of boys, particularly poor rural boys are usually not enrolled in school. (UNESCO, 2016). The positive global trends in universal enrolment, notwithstanding, shows that progress has stalled, with the last 9 percent of primary school children out of school. The global financial crisis has put extra pressure on stretched public funding as well as households struggling to afford school. These out-of-school children are being denied their basic human rights to education and their future opportunities are dramatically limited.

Further to these problems is the issue of language of instruction. Many primary school children do not have a better understanding of English language and their native language. The choice of language of instruction therefore becomes pertinent here.

#### **The Official Language of Instruction Policy in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, the national language policy has been specified in a series of language provisions in the constitution and the National Policy on Education (NPE), (Trudell, 2018). The most recent version of the NPE, adopted in 2013, describes language provision throughout the document, rather than devoting to outlining the language of instruction policy, the NPE specifies that if the community is monolingual, the language of the immediate environment should be used as language of instruction for the first three years of primary school and English will be taught as a subject. In Grade 4 or primary 4, English will be gradually introduced as the language of instruction and the language of the local community is taught as a subject. French and Arabic are also taught as subjects from primary 4 onward (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). The policy does not specify what should be done in cases where the local community is bilingual or multilingual.

In addition, the 2015 National policy on Special Needs Education in Nigeria declares that the federal and state government will be responsible for coordinating training in both sign Language and Braille to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are met. However, both sign language and Braille are not specified as official language of instruction for students who are deaf or hard of hearing or with visual impairment and it is unclear the degree to which this policy has been implemented.

Many scholars and practitioners have noted a lack of consistency and clarity regarding the government language policy in Nigeria as well as implementation. For instance, in an analysis of language issues in education in Nigeria, Trudell (2018) notes that NPE limits instruction in local language to only monolingual communities. However, it is unclear whether that is an actual policy directive or a matter of editing that made the policy unclear. Other scholars have noted similar discrepancies regarding the semantics of the language policy.

In practice, it appears that the instruction in local languages is limited. For instance, in a survey of 100 basic education teachers in Gusau, Zamfara State, 70% of teachers reported that students prefer to be taught in English rather than in a local language (Ibrahim & Gwandu, 2016). The same survey also revealed that only 26% of teachers were aware of provisions of multilingual education in the NPE and only 7% of teachers had actually been implementing such provisions. Furthermore, 93% of teachers reported not having the necessary materials to teach in local languages (Ibrahim & Gwandu, 2016).

#### **Language of Instruction in Education**

The language of instruction may be the mother tongue of students (a language they speak at home and in their community) the official or national language of the country, an international language such as English or a combination of these. A medium of instruction is usually a language used in teaching. It may or may not be the official language of the country or territory. If the first language of the students is different from the official language it may be used as the medium of instruction for part or all of schooling. Bilingual education or multilingual education may involve the use of more than one language of instructions. UNESCO (2016) considers that providing education in a Child's mother tongue is indeed critical. In post secondary, university and special education programme settings, contents may often be taught in a language that is not spoken in the student's homes. This is referred to as content-based learning or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in situations where the medium of instruction of academic disciplines is English in countries where the first language is not English, the phenomenon is referred to as English Medium Instruction`.

#### **Quality of Basic Education**

Sustainable Development Goal 4 pays particular attention to ensuring quality education at pre-primary, primary and secondary levels and lifelong learning for all.

*Quality is the heart of education. It influences what students learn, how well they learn and what benefits they draw from their education (DFAT, 2015).*

Ensuring that students achieve meaningful learning outcomes and acquire values and skills that help them play a positive role in their societies is an issue on the policy agenda of nearly every country. This is possible only through the language of instruction when students or pupils understand or follow what they learn through the instrumentality of the language of instruction. The greatest essence of basic education is that of ensuring quality education at all levels so that children and adults are equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills to contribute to the development and economic growth of other countries.

As many governments strive to strengthen and expand basic education, they also face the challenge of ensuring that students stay in school long enough to acquire the knowledge and skills to contribute and cope in a rapidly changing world. Quality is a much used word in the vocabulary of the global education agenda, but it is a concept that has a range of definitions. There are five components which seem central to understanding quality in basic education, viz:

- ◆ healthy ready to learn children
- ◆ supportive learning environment
- ◆ relevant curriculum content
- ◆ child-centered teaching and learning
- ◆ accurate assessment of learning outcomes to inform school practice and to gain an understanding of success and challenges at the individual, school, sub-national and national levels.

#### **Teacher Language Proficiency or Language Specific Training**

To enroll in a teacher training programme in Nigeria, teachers must have completed senior secondary school and earned an 'O' Level in English Language. This is because further instructions at relevant training programmes take place in English. The general studies component of the NCE curriculum is designed to expose teacher trainees to the academic subjects taught in schools. One of the primary objectives of the general studies component is trainees' proficiency in English to ensure effective teaching and communication in the classroom (National Commission for Colleges of Education, Abuja, 2012). To this end, teachers' trainees take courses in General English over the course of their studies for the NCE (NCCE, 2012). The curriculum does not appear to incorporate any training on developing how to teach

local languages.

In classrooms, teachers' language proficiencies can hamper implementation of the language provisions within the NPE. Research from the British Council reports that code-switching in mother tongue and English is widely practiced in Nigerian primary schools (Trudell, 2018). Many teachers in primary 4 and above are not proficient in English and thus rely on local languages to describe difficult concepts or make clarifications, even though English should be used as the primary (language of instruction) at this point (NPE, 2018).

Implementation of the NPE is further complicated by a lack of teaching and learning materials in the local languages (Trudell, 2018). For primary 1 and beyond, all textbooks for all subjects are written in English, except learning materials for the Nigeria languages subjects which means that teachers are expected to read the materials in English and then teach them in a local language. Teachers do not receive any specific training for code-switching between the teaching and learning materials in English and teaching that content in another language (Trudell, 2018).

#### **Mother Tongue as a Language of Instruction in the Basic Education Programme**

Mother tongue can often be referred to as one's own first language or native language. It is the language that is most commonly speak. However, mother tongue is always referencing the language that the child has used from birth an important and impacting times in the child's life. For example, there are instances where a child is brought up until school age using a particular language spoken by his/her mother, father or other family members, but due to living in another country begins to adopt the language spoken in their interaction groups or school. E.g a Yoruba child living in the north mother tongue in education refers to when school or educational institution integrates the language a child is most familiar with (mother tongue) into the classroom lesson along with the school lesson, such as English (Jim, 2000).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of using the language a learner is comfortable with, a language in which he can express his thought and translate his internal ideas into articulate sentences has been established by many scholars (Taiwo, 1976; Emenanjo, 1996; Osborn, 2007; Olarenwaju, 1996; Oluwole, 2008; Obanya, 1992). Scholars like Kolawole and Dele (2002) consider the use of mother tongue or Nigerian languages in modern education, like the basic

education as one of the problems militating against qualitative teaching and learning of the English language. Emenanjo (1996), therefore advocates teaching and learning in Nigerian language for a greater understanding.

Studies have also shown the effectiveness of teaching children in their L1. Notable among these studies is the Ife six year primary project, which proved that learners achieved better when taught in their mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. Also, the National policy on Education (2004) states that "Government will see to it that the medium of instructions in the primary school is initially the mother tongue of the immediate community and later English. The policy further states in addition that in appreciating the importance of language in the education process and as a means preserving peoples culture, the government considers it in the best interest of National unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than the mother tongue.

Emenanjo cited in Oladokun (2014) states that 'the training of the mind in the understanding of the world around is best done and realized in the languages in which the students are most familiar. It is believed in most cases that the language to which the learner is most familiar with is his mother tongue which should be the medium of instruction in the basic education programme.

Furthermore, Oluwole (2008), while lending his voice to the importance of using indigenous languages as a medium of instructions in the modern education like the Basic education programme that it is therefore generally acceptable that in teaching and learning processes, the mother tongue of the child is of utmost importance. This assertion is apt because it categorizes the large part of the child's environments, that is, it has names of all objects, actions, ideas, attributes, etc., that is so important to him as well as his society.

#### **The Importance of Language of Instruction in the Basic Education Programme**

A growing body of evidence as shown in the studies of Taiwo (1976), Emenanjo (1996), Osborn (2007), Olarenwaju (1996), Obanya (1992) as well as Kolawole and Dele (2002) demonstrates that children learn to read best in a language they use and understand, but unfortunately, about 40 percent of children around the world attend classes in a language they do not speak or use. Predictably, when students are required to learn to read in a language they don't understand, the results are poor learning outcome in the early years of primary school, which contributes to significant grade repetition and high dropout rates

(USAID Reading Manual, 2012).

Significantly, instruction in a first language can yield significant benefits both at the individual and systemic levels in the early grades which include:

- ♦ Improved education access, equity and inclusion.
- ♦ Improved early literacy outcome.
- ♦ Increase in learner-centered teaching practices and assessment.
- ♦ Improved education efficiency due to lower dropout and repetition rates.

Implementing effective instruction in languages students use and understand requires careful considerations of contextual factors. This involves the engagement of a variety of stakeholders to ensure language is addressed and incorporated in curriculum, teacher placement and professional development and multiple other areas of education system in teaching and learning processes. It requires clear policies, standards, bench marks and practices from the national level to the classroom level to ensure students receive the instruction they need to become strong readers and learners in the basic education programme. An important first step in designing and implementing effective language of instructions policies is the use of mapping exercise this will provide important data and insights for implementing policies effectively and influencing programmatic decision making.

Given the linguistic diversity in Nigeria, Language mapping exercises can help identify which languages children use at home (including spoken and sign languages) and determines which language should be used for instructions within a school community or geographic area of the Basic education implementation programme.

Language mapping can also help inform teacher placement. By understanding the language used in schools and those that teachers speak, policies and practice can be adjusted to promote "teacher-student language match". Teachers should be placed in schools and classrooms when and where they speak the same language as the students. Additionally, language mapping can help identify gaps and learning materials for certain languages and prioritize development of materials for languages that have limited resources available.

#### **Conclusion**

The basic education programme which refers to the whole range of educational activities taking place in various schools requires a great planning and implementation efforts. One of the greatest requirements for the success of the basic education in teaching and learning is the language of instruction.

It is believed that when children understand the language of instruction, they are more likely to enter school in time, attend school regularly and drop out less frequently. An analysis of data from 26 countries and 160 language group showed that children who had access to instruction in their mother tongue were significantly more likely to be enrolled and attending school, while a lack of education in the first language was a significant reason for children dropping out of school. (Smitts, Huisman & Kruijff, 2008).

#### **Recommendation**

It is believed that for the Basic education to attain its desired goal for sustainable Development Goals (SDGS) of 2030, language of instruction should be prioritized so that effective teaching and learn could be realized.

#### **References**

- Alison, P. & Amy, P. (2008). A Hand book on language of instruction. Issues in reading programs. A Global Reading Network Resources.
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) (2015). Strategy for Australia aid investment in education 2015-2020, September, Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved 13-2- 2022, <http://dfat.gov.au/about->