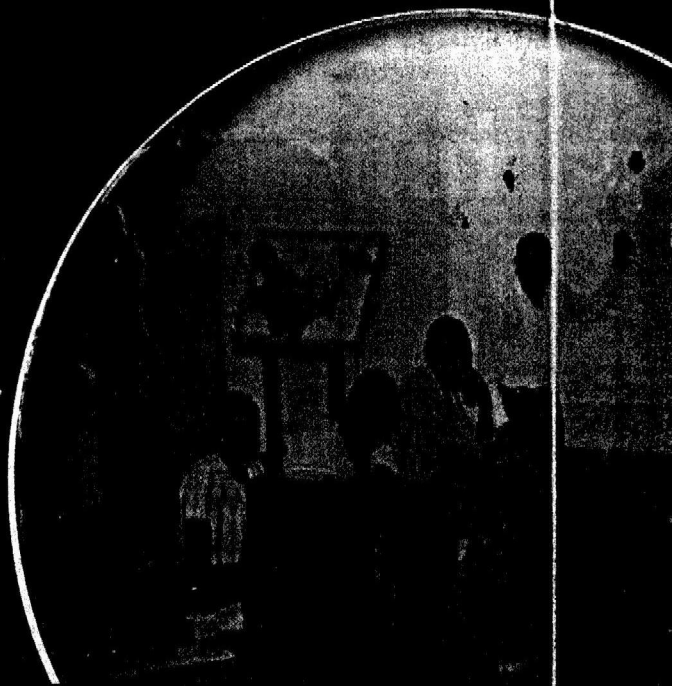


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# **Linguistics and Mother Tongue Education: Problems and Prospects**

by

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## **0.1 Abstract**

The Nigerian government's policy on the use of language in education and the attempt to encourage the use of indigenous Nigerian languages (NL) in the educational system leaves much to be desired. We are aware that the issue of language in education both as a medium of instruction and a subject of study is one of the concerns of linguistics. In this paper therefore, we will investigate the use of the mother tongue (ie. Efik) in primary education in Calabar town and the relevance of linguistics in this. The paper will discuss the problems and challenges in the implementation process with a view to finding solutions to these problems. The paper will equally consider the prospects of the use of the mother tongue in primary education as a way forward in enhancing content delivery at this level of education.

## **1.0 Introduction**

The existence of a national language policy in Nigeria is a controversial issue. The reason is that what is known as the National Language Policy (NLP) is actually an appendage of the National Policy on Education (NPE). We are not concerned about the controversy but we would like to work on what can be described as the language policy. As stated in the National Policy on Education, the use of the mother tongue in education is an important issue. A mother tongue is not only the language a group of people in a community acquire and make use of in communication; it is the spoken heritage of the speech community. In Nigeria, there are many languages that are described as mother tongues (MT). These include every Indigenous Nigerian Language (INL) and they equally constitute what the NPE refers to as the Language of the Immediate Environment (LIE). In this paper, our concern centers on the Efik language, which is one of the languages indigenous to Cross River State, and which also constitutes the language of the immediate environment in Calabar. Considering the language policy in education, is Efik language being used in the school system? The issue of the use of the mother tongue in education has had a long history in Nigeria. It goes back to the early 1950s, and as Bamgbose (1970) has noted, the use of the mother tongue in primary education came into being with the adoption of the idea that a child's education is best begun in the mother tongue.

In a similar vein, Grant (1973) had earlier asserted that in order to encourage a child to think for himself or herself, which is one of the aims of education, he/she must be encouraged to think in his or her own language. Now we may then ask, "What is the national language policy?"

## 1.1 National Language Policy on Education

We have already observed that what constitutes the language policy is an appendage (more like an after-thought) in the National Policy on Education. This appendage is reproduced below:

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject from the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of the immediate environment and French shall be taught as subject (National Policy on Education (2004) Article 17-e)

The implications of the above statement above will be discussed in the course of this paper.

## 2.0 Theoretical Framework

This section discusses the concept of linguistics in mother tongue education. Sofunke (1990) argues that there are two propositions on linguistics in the national language policy, and these are:

- (a) That language as the most sublime creation of the human mind has got to be cultivated and promoted.
- (b) That language as a product of the human mind is capable of giving expression to any activity of the human being.

Proposition (b) above focuses on language as a product of the human mind and provides the basis for us to expatiate on our theoretical framework, which is the mentalist theory of language acquisition/learning. The mentalist theory of language acquisition and learning asserts that every normal child has the innate capacity for language development. That is, the child is endowed with a language acquisition device (LAD), as referred to in Universal Grammar (UG), which enables the child to acquire a language. The LAD in UG is the inherited knowledge of the structure of human language possessed by human beings.

Since the child is born with the facilities that enable him/her to acquire a language, it follows then that the mind has imprints of what language is like. This possession is manifested when the child is exposed to the raw data of the language in his/her environment. It implies that the child acquires a language of his/her immediate environment by relating what s/he hears to his/her unconscious knowledge of the structure that underlies all languages. The child uses UG to make sense of utterances s/he hears around him/her.

Lyons (2002) (citing Smith & Wilson) summarizes the role of the UG in language acquisition as follows:

- (1) It accounts for the striking similarities among human languages, even those which, as far as is known are historically and geographically unrelated...
- (2) The second role of the language acquisition device is in accounting for the speed, ease and regularity with which children learn their first language.

Based on what we have said so far, we wish to posit that linguistics has a major role to play in mother tongue education because it empowers the child's mother tongue for pedagogy at the primary school level and beyond by providing descriptions of the language(s) and other teaching aids.

## 2.0 Advantages of Mother Tongue in Primary Education

There are many merits in the use of the mother tongue in learning at the primary level. Since the child has acquired his/her mother tongue, it adequately situates the child in a position to learn the basics as s/he relates the classroom situation to what obtains in the society. Examples have been cited where the use of the mother tongue is not an impediment to national development. For example, Elugbe (1990) cites in examples of Somalia and Tanzania who have involved African languages in national development and have



been quite successful.

Also, the Asian countries, Germany, former USSR all make use of their mother tongue in education and other types of development and they are forces to reckon with in today's technological development. As Bangbose (1976) quoted in Elugbe (1990), "our children should be able to learn the basics of modern technology science and mathematics... in their mother tongue." The assertion that learning in the mother is beneficial and advantageous to the child is supported by solid evidence, such as the Ife six-year primary project and the Rivers Readers project, both of which have been so extensively cited that they need no further elaboration here. Apart from the advantages to pedagogy, these projects also contributed immensely to the development of the relevant indigenous Nigerian languages.

The use of the mother tongue in education will ensure the development of many more indigenous Nigerian languages. This would have several advantages. As Elugbe (1990) observes, "one of the advantages of developing the vast majority of our languages is that nobody will be left out of the development process. More importantly, nobody will think or feel that s/he is being left out." In addition, getting a degree in any of the indigenous Nigerian languages would not necessarily impact negatively on one's career. For example, Sam Johnson has noted that "people with first degree in Yoruba language are making waves in journalism" Ojunta (2007) agrees that any indigenous Nigerian language does not place anybody at a disadvantage, but the acquisition and learning in these indigenous languages must start at the primary education level.

#### **4.0 Purpose of this Study**

Given the importance of the mother tongue as a language of instruction and the medium of communication, this study seeks to appraise the use of the mother tongue as a language of instruction in primary schools in Calabar town. This exercise aims at proffering suggestions on the issue of non-implementation of the language policy as stated in the National Policy on Education. The specific objectives of this study are:

- (1) To find out if the mother tongue (Efik) is being used as a vehicle of instruction
- (2) To determine if Efik is taught as a school subject in the primary schools.
- (3) To find out the factor which impedes the teaching and use of Efik as the language of instruction.

#### **4.1 Instrumentation**

The instrument for data collection was a set of fifteen (15) item questionnaire divided into two sections. Section A deals with questions to elicit responses on the use of Efik as a language of instruction as well as the awareness of the language provision in the NPE. The questions were to test the specific objectives of the study. Our informants responded to each of the items using a two-point scale YES (2 points) and No (1 point). Participant observation was also used as a means to confirm the response (cf. Appendix). There were also discussions with some of the teachers during the observation period.

#### **4.2 Population**

These comprised of teachers in selected schools in Calabar town which comprises two Local Government Areas viz; Calabar South and Calabar Municipality. The subjects were twenty (20) primary school teachers who were actively involved in teaching Primary classes 1- 3 in public schools. Ten schools from the two Local Government Areas (i.e five primary schools per L.G.A. ) were visited.



## Findings and Discussion

### Table 1: Percentages of Response on Variables 1-12

Variables	Yes	No	Total
Is your mother tongue ?	60	40	100
Do you teach all the subjects in Primary 1 - 3 in Efik?	*30	70	100
Are there pupils in your class who speak other various Nigerian languages?	50	50	100
Is Efik language taught as a subject?	*100	-	100
Are you aware that the National Policy on Education states that the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate environment (LIE) should be used as the medium of instruction in Primaries 1 - 3?	*85	15	100
Do you as a teacher implement this policy?	*35	65	100
Do different levels of government encourage the implementation of this policy??	*30	70	100
Do you think it is advisable to use Efik as the medium of instruction in Primary 1-3?	*65	35	100
Is the majority of the teachers teaching Primary 1 - 3 in Efik?	60	40	100
Do you think the use of Efik will impede pupils' performance in higher classes?	*25	75	100
Are other school activities for Primary 1 - 3 performed in Efik language?	*40	60	100
Do you think we should use Efik language instead of English in teaching Primaries 1 - 3?	70	30	100

The result as presented on Table 1 above shows the response of the population on the implementation of the National Language Policy (NPL), which states that the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate environment (LIE) should be the language of instruction for the first three years of Primary education. The results affirm our assumption that the National Language Policy is not being implemented. In order to achieve objective 1, a look at Table I attests to the fact that there is no implementation of the National Language Policy. A look at the percentages in response to the questions 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11 & 12 as highlighted with an asterisk (\*) affirms the fact that the National Language Policy is not being implemented by the teachers even the government that instituted the policy. On the other hand, questions 1, 3 & 9, about one third of the total number of questions, show that even the native speakers of Efik that outnumber the non-native speakers also appreciate the use of their mother tongue as a language of instruction. The reason for the assumption that there should be a marked difference in the percentages on the other questions.

We wish to state that section B of the question showed that of the twenty teachers, fifteen of them had National Certificate in Education (NCE) while five of them had Teachers' Grade II Certificate. The use of the education level was to find out if they were aware of the policy and the majority of NCE are aware of the policy as shown on Table 1, question 5 (cf. 7.0).

The main concern of this paper is in the challenges and prospects of implementing the national language policy as it deals with the formal education of the child in his/her mother tongue. Therefore, we have presented the percentages of the responses as shown on Table 1 above.

We wish to state that the core questions for this article are questions 5, 8 and question 10. The percentages of the responses have shown that the language policy as stipulated in the NPE is not being implemented. The questions which therefore arise are, "Why is the language policy as contained in the NPE not being implemented?" and "Why is the mother tongue (Efik) not being used in the formal education of children?" We would attempt to answer these questions in the following section.

### **8.0 Challenges to the Implementation of the NPE**

The Nigerian society has what could be described as a language policy on education, which stipulates that the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment (in this case Efik) should be used as the language of instruction in the first three years of primary education. The implementation of this policy is the result of reasons which include:

- (a) At the pre-primary level, most of which are privately owned, the English language and not the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment (Efik) is the medium of instruction. This is a continuum in this pattern because the pupils transit from the pre-primary into the primary level where the use of English as the language of instruction.
- (b) There are not many textbooks for the different levels of education. For example, there are no orthographies for most Nigerian languages and it therefore implies that there will be no dictionaries, literary texts, etc in the indigenous languages. So we can safely say that where there are cases text books for instance, in Efik exist, they are not current enough to meet the technological development of the contemporary world (cf. 8.0c).

- (c) There are hardly teachers who are trained in the indigenous languages. For example, as observed by Olaofe (1990), the twenty (university) departments that offer courses in Nigerian languages promote the learning of only the three (3) major Nigerian languages and pay little attention to the “minority” languages.
- (d) As a follow up to (d) above, teachers are unwilling and reluctant to study Nigerian languages at the University level. For instance, in a university where there is a BA programme in Efik, an indigenous Nigerian language, only six students are enrolled in the programme.
- (e) With regard to the level of development of indigenous languages, what could be said is that the level of development is relatively too slow. For instance, about twenty five years after the policy (i.e NPE) was promulgated, it is only just now that metalanguages for indigenous Nigerian languages (e.g. Efik and Ibibio) are getting developed and syllabuses for teaching with the indigenous languages being streamlined.
- (f) Another problem is the absence or lack of teacher training and re-training on the techniques of teaching the indigenous languages. In fact, teachers are ashamed to acquire degrees in the indigenous Nigerian languages because of the fear that they may not find employment easily after graduation. As earlier pointed out this fear is unfounded (cf. Sam Johnson in 3.0).
- (g) As observed by Olaofe (1990), another problem is that the teaching of English (and of recent French) overshadows the teaching of Nigerian languages.
- (h) The greatest problem is the lack of “political will” by the different tiers of government to invest in the development of indigenous Nigerian languages. For instance, Essien (1990) asserts that “... government, whether state or federal, have never really considered the language question an important national issue”. This negative attitude still upholds today. In addition, the attitude of the elites towards the development and use of our indigenous languages leaves much to be desired.
- (i) The negative attitude of the different governments and the elites mentioned above results in insufficient provision of funds for the consistent development of the indigenous languages. This has led to the problem of lack of intensive and extensive research on the indigenous languages.

The above are the core reasons for the non-implementation of the language policy. From the foregoing, we are in agreement with Okon (1990) and Akindele & Adegbite (2005) in asserting that “it is essential that Nigerians themselves should re-examine their attitude to English vis-à-vis the indigenous languages”.

From the items listed as challenges to the implementation of the National Language Policy, the questions in the questionnaires, especially 5, 6, 7 & 8 illustrate the attitudes of both the teachers and the government on the aspect of implementing this policy. In relation to the findings, the percentages succinctly affirm our assumption that the policy is not implemented because of the issues raised in items (a) (j).

### **2.2 The Role of Linguistics in Mother Tongue Education**

As pointed out in 2.0 above, linguistics has several roles to play in mother tongue education. For instance it provides the theoretical framework on which to prepare a child born into any linguistic group to fit into the environment he/she finds himself/herself.

In addition, Olaofe (1990) has categorized the role of linguistics in the implementation of the



language policy into three subheads-language development, materials development and pedagogical roles. These roles will be summarized here.

- (a) To develop the various mother tongues through preparation and standardization of orthographies, provision of pronunciation guides etc, as the language is put in a form that can be written, printed or read.
- (b) To make use of linguistic knowledge to prepare and produce textbooks, readers, technical and scientific manuals, etc, in Nigerian languages
- (c) Finally, while using the mother tongue as the language of instruction, linguistic knowledge will be applied in the learning and teaching techniques. In addition, it will train teachers who will then be competent to teach with the mother tongue which in this case in Efik, at all the levels of education

#### **.10.0 Prospects of Mother Tongue Education**

So far we have considered the challenges of teaching with indigenous languages and the role of linguistics in mother tongue education. What then are the prospects and the way forward? Different proposals have been put forward on how to overcome the numerous problems that hinder the use of mother tongue in education. For instance, Essien (1990) has suggested a three-pronged attack in which the government, the linguists and the speakers of the languages themselves must be involved. For this paper, we will provide summaries of what we think should be the way forward:

- (a) The government must develop the political will to consider the immediate development of indigenous language as a sure means to national development and change its negative attitude. For, as Elugbe (1990) asserts, one of the advantages of developing the vast majority of our languages is that nobody will be left out of the development process.
- (b) The training and re-training of teachers in mother tongue education (such as Efik) should be vigorously pursued as it will encourage people to want to acquire degrees in their mother tongues. A policy whereby a "crash" programme is set up on the training of teachers in indigenous languages will go a long way to provide enough manpower to teach at the different levels of education.
- (c) Indigenous languages' teachers should be encouraged to belong to associations like the Association of Nigerian Languages' Teachers (ANLAT). Indigenous Nigerian languages' teacher in the primary and secondary schools should be sponsored by the different levels of government to attend workshops and conferences in order to update their knowledge on and acquire teaching skills in the indigenous language(s).
- (d) A language centre where researches can be carried out should be established and properly funded by the federal government. Such an agency could be saddled with the responsibility of streamlining researches on indigenous languages. In this vein, it is rather unfortunate and sad that the National Institute of Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) is now affiliated to a Nigerian university by government fiat instead of being granted autonomy and properly funded. This action casts doubts about the sincerity of government toward the development of Nigerian languages.
- (e) There should be an aggressive enlightenment of parents and their wards on the value and benefits of acquiring a degree in indigenous Nigerian languages. This will help abate their current negative attitudes.
- (f) As suggested by Elugbe (1990), every Nigerian youth who studies an indigenous Nigerian language which is not his/her mother tongue (and/or which s/he does not already speak) at any tertiary institution of learning should be given a bursary. This would encourage more Nigerian youths to study our languages. These writers suggest that the teaching of Nigerian languages should form part of the General Studies Programme in our universities. The way forward is not limited to what we

ive. The next section will make some recommendations.

#### Conclusion

In this article, we have presented some of the recommendations as put up by Urua (2007) which we find relevant to

remuneration of indigenous language teachers.

Recognition and establishment of national, regional, state, local government languages in Nigeria.

Recognition and standardization of erstwhile undescribed Nigerian languages.

Use of indigenous languages in the propagation of government programmes for more effectiveness and participation.

Creation of award and prizes for (literary) works produced in indigenous languages.

The article also recommends the intensive education of members of the society about the fact that the use of indigenous languages prevents the death of such languages and their cultures. Also, the government

should have the political will to sponsor the development of the languages, irrespective of whether they are

spoken by Nigerians. Nigerians should eschew ethnic sentiments in order to solve the problem of the use of indigenous languages in education and for national development.

The role of linguistics in mother tongue education is well known. This article has shown that though

the policy on the use of the mother tongue in primary education, this policy is not being

implemented. In order to ensure the effective implementation of this policy, the different levels of government

must provide service to it. They must set up monitoring teams to supervise the implementation. We

think that linguistics has several roles to play in the implementation of the policy, such as the

development of a theoretical framework, development and provision of materials for effective implementation,

and the need for the public to be enlightened and educated in order to change their attitudes to the acquisition of a

mother tongue language. We have expatiated on the challenges and made suggestions on how they can

be met. We have also proffered recommendations such as the proper remuneration of indigenous

language teachers. We wish to end with an apt quotation by Sofunke (1990) that:

Language policy, to be sure, is a matter of *theory* and *practice* and since practice without theory is blind, it is

the role of linguistics to present all the options, at a theoretical level to the political authorities of the

country. In Nigeria, the theory, which is stating the language policy, must be complemented by

effective implementation.

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### Appendix

Questionnaire on linguistics and mother tongue education: problems and prospects. This questionnaire is designed to find out the implementation of the language policy in Primary 1-3 through the use of Efik Language. Please tick the appropriate option-(Yes) or (No).



## SECTION A. QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Is Efik language your mother tongue? Yes  No.
2. Do you teach all the subjects in primary 1-3 in Efik? Yes  No.
3. Are there pupils in your class who speak other indigenous Nigeria language? Yes  No.
4. Is Efik language taught as a subject? Yes  No.
5. Are you aware that the National Policy on Education states that, the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate environment (LIE) should be used as the medium of instruction in primary 1-3? Yes  No.
6. Do you as a teacher implement this policy? Yes  No
7. Do the different levels of government encourage the implementation of the policy? Yes  No.
8. Do you think it is advisable to use Efik as the language of instruction? Yes  No.
9. Do the majority of teachers teaching primary 1-3 speak Efik? Yes  No
10. Do you think the use of Efik will impede pupil's performance in the higher classes? Yes  No
11. Are all other school activities for primary 1-3 performed in Efik? Yes  No.
12. Do you think we should use Efik Language instead of English in teaching primary 1-3 pupils  
Yes  No.

## SECTION B

Educational

Qualification:.....

Class taught:.....

Local Government Area of Origin.....