Abstract: This paper aims at discussing the relevance of mother tongue in achieving a constructivists’ classroom environment at the Primary education level in Nigeria. Philosophical research methodology was employed in this study. The study reveals that the relevance of mother tongue as a medium for instruction includes increase access to instruction and equity, improve learning outcome, socio-cultural benefits such as sustainability of acceptable social values and norms, lower costs of education and, encouragement of creativity and improvisation skills. The author recommends that studies be carried out to examine the level of implementation of the recommendations of national policy on education on the use of mother tongue as a medium at lower levels of education in Nigeria.

Key Words: Mother Tongue, Constructive learning environment, science education, primary education

1. Introduction

Webster defines education as the process of educating or teaching. To Educate is further defined as “to develop the knowledge, skill, or character of...” Thus, from these definitions, we might assume that the purpose of education is to develop the knowledge, skills, and character of students. But what then is knowledge? Is it a body of information that exists “out there”—apart from the human thought processes that developed it? If we look at the standards and benchmarks developed by many states—or at E. D. Hirsch’s list of information needed for Cultural Literacy, we might assume this definition of knowledge to be correct.

However, there is considerable research leading others to believe that knowledge arises in the mind of an individual when that person interacts with an idea or experience. This is hardly a new argument. In ancient Greece, Socrates argued that education was about drawing out what was already within the student and hence, nourish and nurture that which is in the student to grow. A common conception holds that etymologically, education comes from two Latin words, e-ducere meaning “to lead out” and e-ducare meaning, “to nourish.”

Education is a complex term that cannot be pinned down to a particular definition. There are as many definitions of the concept as there are philosophers and scholars in the field of education. One common thing in the definitions given by all the philosophers and scholars of education is the fact that all of them see education as the transmission and/or acquisition of values. These values depend on what and how each society sees and judges it. Smith L. in Osokoya defined Education as the culture, which each generation purposely gives to those who are to become its successor to qualify them for at least keeping, and if possible raising the level of improvement, which has been attained. This definition shows that education is a deliberate or a purposeful act of giving and/or acquiring cultures, which exist in a particular society. These cultures differ from society to society. Following the same line of thought, Otonti N. in Osokoya, in his book Western Education and the Nigerian Cultural Background relates education as a process of cultural transmission, using culture to embrace language, beliefs, food, arts, music, literature, science and technology.

Language is an integral part of any culture. It is one aspect of culture that distinguishes it from other cultures. Hence, every child born into any culture will first acquire the linguistic aspect of that culture into which he is born. This linguistic aspect of the society is what we refer to as Mother Tongue.

According to the National Policy on Education, primary education is the education given in institutions for children aged 6 to 11 plus. The duration shall be for six years. All over the
world, primary education has been regarded as the most important as well as the most patronized by people. This perhaps may be due to the fact that it is the foundation of the whole educational pursuit, which is expected to provide literacy and enlightenment to the citizens.3

3. The concept of Mother Tongue

Mother tongue or mother language refers to a child’s first language, the Language learned in the home from older family members. (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO).6 Several questions have arisen about what constitutes a Mother Tongue, especially in such urban centers such as Port-Harcourt, Lagos or Abuja in Nigeria where inhabitants come from different parts of the country. In some places, the term has taken on more of a culturally symbolic definition, so that an individual might say, ‘I don’t actually speak my mother tongue’. Language and identity are linked, as the term Mother Tongue implies. A healthy identity balances different aspects of our personalities. A community expresses part of its identity through its languages and a healthy society makes choices that promote harmonious communities and confident individuals.

One of the popular criteria used to define the mother tongue is that it is “the language one thinks, dreams and counts in” (Skutnabb-Kangas).7 UNESCO gave the description of Mother Tongue as the language:

- One has learnt first;
- One identifies with or is identified as a native speaker of by others,
- One knows best; and
- One uses most.8

4. Historic Review of the Position of Language in Nigeria

In a multilingual and multietnic environment like Nigeria, a large number of indigenous languages exist and the number has been put differently, Hansford mentions 395; Banjo in Ayilara and Oyedeji says 500,14 and Bamgbose maintains that it is 513 (Makinde ).15 Despite this large number, English therefore, remain the official national language and as a result the generality of the population is inclined towards oral use of English Language. Practically in our schools system English language has become the preeminent language of education right from the colonial time to the present, as Oderinde noted that “English Language rode on the back of British colonialism into Nigeria in the 19th century”,16 and has since become the medium of instruction right from nursery one and throughout school life.

Exclusively, English is taught as a subject at all level while the indigenous languages largely suffer neglect and are mostly restricted to their domains or regions of use (Adegbiija cited in Abidogun and Adebule)17. In fact, of all the indigenous languages, only three have been recognized to be taught within the school system - that is, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo largely for socio-political relevance. Oderinde maintained that English language assumed this new status through the instrumentality of aggressive colonial governmental machinery and, through the culpable acquiescence by the indigenous population who perceived the use of English tongue as a symbol being educated18. Equally, he argued that the overseas returnees (the educated reprieved slaves) who flaunted their novel Language acquisition to the blind admiration of the locals, and who often times aped them in their speech contributed to the bloated premium placed in English language over Nigerian indigenous languages. The aping and the idea of looking at English expression as class have led to about 80% (if not higher percentage) of the Nigerian elite in the Southern Nigeria speaking more English to their kindergarten children than the mother tongue at home.

The situation as observed by Ogbona (cited in Abidogun and Adebule)19 tend to have led to huge imbalance in bilingualism involving English and Nigerian languages to the extent that many educated Nigerians cannot read or write in their native language or Modern Tongue. Fafunwa however, through research, established that the best language for good concept formation at a very tender age is the indigenous language.20,21 The research was conducted in 1970, at the Institute of Education of the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife) in Osun State of Nigeria. The ‘Ife Six-Year Primary Project’ was designed to use Yoruba language as a medium of instruction in primary schools in Osun State of Nigeria. This project was based on the premise that:

(a). the child will benefit culturally, socially, linguistically and cognitively.
(b). the child’s command of English will be improved if he is taught English as an entirely separate subject by a specialist teacher through the six years.

5. The call for the use of Mother Tongue as a medium of instruction

The early Educational stage of children is very essential in the life of children; hence, the recent focus on its desirability across the globe. It
provides an effective medium of instruction for children whose age bracket is from 0-8 years. This period, as described by Osanyin, is extremely crucial to an individual’s intellectual, emotional, social and physical development. It is on this fact that the Phelps-Stokes commission report of 1922 recommended the use of Mother Tongue as a medium for instruction at the lower levels of elementary schools.

However, the first major international support for the idea of using Mother Tongue as a medium for instruction in school emerged at the UNESCO conference in 1951 where it was unanimously agreed that education is best carried out in the Mother Tongue. The conference thus recommended that “pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue” and that “the use of the mother tongue is extended to as late a stage in education as possible.” (UNESCO)

The significance of the Mother Tongue Education in early development of children’s education, accounts for the series of International conferences and conventions notable amongst which is the 1990 convention to the Right of the Child, World conference on Education For All (EFA), in Jomtien in 1990 and EFA Summit in New Delhi in 1993 respectively and Organization of African Union International Conference on Assistance to Africa Children. At the various congregations, the child became a “Priority”. Right of the child to free and compulsory education an obligation of the state was canvassed and especially that the Phelps -Stokes commission report of 1922 stipulates that 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.

5.1. The benefits of Mother Tongue as a medium for instruction in schools

Children learn better if they understand the language used as medium for instruction. Even in situations where the main goal of learning is for children to acquire a second language, this too is facilitated by beginning with a language children already know. The relevance of this study is hereby summarized in the following:

i. Increased access and equity: The use of Mother Tongue as a medium for instruction, especially in schools in the rural areas will be of great benefit to the rural people. It will play a key role in keeping children from poor homes in school. Children from poor background with less exposure can feel the sense of belonging as well as being carried along if Mother Tongue is used as a medium for instruction. This is because they understand the instruction being pass across and also can identify the various elements of the instruction.

ii. Improved learning outcomes: The use of a language that children understand allows teachers to use more active and effective teaching methods as well as instructional materials. Supporting mastery of the first language promotes the cognitive development needed to learn a second language easily. The use of local languages also ensures that the knowledge children bring to school is used as a basis for further learning.

iii. Socio-cultural benefits: There are values that exist in every society and these values motivates/directs the education in such society and these values are concretized in the curriculum. The curriculum is then used to direct the education processes of the school/institution. The use of local languages for instruction often leads to inclusion of more local content in the curriculum and greater participation of parents and community members as classroom resources. Parents will be better positioned to become involved in the school and to feel that their knowledge and their culture are valued. The legitimization of local languages that comes from their use in schooling can strengthen children, families’ and communities’ sense of inclusion in schooling. The use of local languages in formal education has a positive impact on adult literacy as well. As parents see their children successfully learn to read and write in their own language, the parents are often motivated to attend literacy classes as well.

iv. Lower costs of education: The financial benefits of the use of local languages in education derive largely from decreases in repetition and dropout. Equally, instructional resources can easily be sourced for, and can be manufactured locally.

v. Encourages creativity and improvisation: The use of Mother Tongue as a medium for instruction will greatly enhance the pupils’ creativity and improvisation skills. This is because the pupils will improvise to solve whatever task they are expected to perform, especially when faced with the challenge of unavailability of instructional materials.

6. Science at the Basic Education Level

Science is an intellectual activity through which man seeks to understand and, find solutions
to challenges facing him and his environment. Oluwasegun, Ohwofosirai, and Emagbetre (2015) described Science as the taproot upon which the bulk of present day technological development is built. The development of any nation is a measure of its level of science education.

7. Constructivism in Teaching and Learning

Constructivism is built on the belief that learners actively create, interpret, and reorganize knowledge in individual ways. These fluid intellectual transformations occur when students reconcile formal instructional experiences with their existing knowledge, with the cultural and social contexts in which ideas occur, and with a host of other influences that serve to mediate understanding. With respect to instruction, this belief suggests that students should participate in experiences that accommodate these ways of learning. Such experiences include problem-based learning, inquiry activities, dialogues with peers and teachers that encourage making sense of the subject matter, exposure to multiple sources of information, and opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding in diverse ways. According to Mark Windschitl, constructivism is based on the assertion that learners actively create, interpret, and reorganize knowledge in individual ways. "These fluid intellectual transformations," he maintain, "occur when students reconcile formal instructional experiences with their existing knowledge, with the cultural and social contexts in which ideas occur, and with a host of other influences that serve to mediate understanding." Four epistemological assumptions are at the heart of what we refer to as "constructivist learning." The first one is, learners who are involved in active learning physically construct knowledge. Second is knowledge is symbolically constructed by learners who are making their own representations of action; Knowledge is socially constructed by learners who convey their meaning making to others; and last one is, Knowledge is theoretically constructed by learners who try to explain things they don't completely understand.

The constructivist school of thought emphasizes a greater involvement of the learner in teaching and learning processes. These, they say, can be achieved by giving the learner more responsibility while the teacher assumes a lesser role in the classroom. The constructivists proposed the learner-centered teaching method.

According to Windschitl, a growing number of teachers are embracing the fundamental ideas of constructivist learning, that their students' background knowledge profoundly affects how they interpret subject matter and that students learn best when they apply their knowledge to solve authentic problems, engage in "sense-making" dialogue with peers, and strive for deep understanding of core ideas rather than recall of a laundry list of facts.

7.1. Characteristics of Constructivist Classroom Environment

- the learners are actively involved
- the environment is democratic
- the activities are interactive and student-centered
- the teacher facilitates a process of learning in which students are encouraged to be responsible and autonomous

Furthermore, in the constructivist classroom, students work primarily in groups and learning and knowledge are interactive and dynamic. There is a great focus and emphasis on social and communication skills, as well as collaboration and exchange of ideas. This is in contrast to the traditional classroom, where students work independently; where learning is achieved through repetition; where instructions adhere strictly to the curriculum and are guided by textbooks; and where the teachers comments are followed to the later by the students.

Table 1: Comparison between traditional and constructivist Classroom Environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional classroom</th>
<th>Constructivist classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Begins with parts of the whole – Emphasizes basic skills</td>
<td>Begin with the whole – expanding to parts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict adherence to fixed curriculum</td>
<td>Pursuit of student questions / interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textbooks and workbooks</td>
<td>Primary Sources / manipulative materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor gives/students receive</td>
<td>Learning is interaction – building on what students already know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor assumes directive, authoritative role</td>
<td>Instructor interacts / negotiates with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment via testing / correct answers</td>
<td>Assessment via student works, observations, points of view, tests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is inert</td>
<td>Process is as important as product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students work individually</td>
<td>Knowledge is dynamic / change with experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students work in groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source
8. Relevance of Mother Tongue in Achieving a Constructivist Science Classroom Environment

Science is an intellectual activity through which man seeks to understand and, find solutions to challenges facing him and his environment. The development of any nation is a measure of her science education. Developed nations of the world are nations who have embraced science education and have put in place processes of acculturating science into their system. Mother Tongue is highly relevant to the achievement of constructivist science classroom environment, especially at the basic education level. As emphasized above, the objective of the constructivist school of thought is to create an environment where learners can participate actively in the learning process and thus, construct knowledge for themselves from their interaction with the learning environment. In summary, the following are the relevance of mother tongue to the achievement of constructivist classroom environment:

- In teaching and learning, it is always best to move from concrete to abstract, specific to general. In other words, learning becomes easier when children are introduced into new concept, starting with/from what they know and can identify with easily.
- The use of Mother Tongue as a medium for instruction will give room for active participation of the pupils in the teaching and learning process. The pupils can be engaged also in the sourcing for materials needed to enhance teaching and learning.
- The use of Mother Tongue as a medium for instruction enables the pupils to development creativity skills. This is because they can identify instruments which can be used to produce instructional materials in their immediate environment, and can equally assist in the production of these instructional materials.
- The use of Mother Tongue will also enable the teacher to draw examples and inferences from real life experiences of the children as well as that of their immediate environment.
- Assimilation and recall of information and instruction will be easier for the students.

It will be worthy to note that the main aim of education is to equip individuals with skills and values. Hence, education is described as the “transfer and acquisition of skills and values”. The educated person is “someone who has acquired skills and values”. These skills enable the individual to find a means of livelihood as well as contribute to the development of the society. Values are relative to individuals and society. What might seem valuable to a given society might be useless to another and vice versa. Every society tries to instill her values to her young members through the processes of education. Societal values are embedded in the culture of the society and Language is a major component of culture. Therefore, the best way of passing these skills and values across is by means on the language of the society, the Mother Tongue. The sort of skills and values inferred in this paragraph is meant for children at the early stages of their education and it is meant to serves as the foundation for acquisition of skills and values that can be applied globally. At the appropriate level, when the children are matured enough to acquire skills and values of global standard, a more globalised language can be used as medium for instruction.

9. Recommendations

The author recommend that further studies be carried out to ascertain the level of implementation of the recommendations of the National Policy on Education on the use of Mother Tongue as a medium for instruction at the Nursery and Lower levels of Primary education in Nigeria.

References


[25] Ibid.

[26] National Policy on Education (NPE 2004), pg 10