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English Language as a Threat to Mother Tongue Instruction in Primary Schools in Benue State: The Case of Tiv Language

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Abstract: The primary school level is an important phase in the cultural, linguistic and educational life of a child. Children transit from home to primary school in order to learn the basic skills of life for survival. The child's mother tongue plays a vital role in the acquisition of these basic skills. In fact, studies indicate that the mother tongue helps children to learn better. The mother tongue also fosters transfer and preservation of the culture of parents from one generation to another. Unfortunately, there are indicators that the use of the mother tongue among the Tiv people is fast declining. This article provides such evidence and advances reasons why English Language is preferred over and above Tiv language, a development which poses a threat to mother tongue instruction. The article further discusses the importance of using the mother tongue in any human society and then makes some suggestions to prevent Tiv language from becoming extinct.

Keywords: mother language, mother tongue instruction, Tiv language, English language.

Introduction

Linguists generally classify language survival into three main categories namely safe, endangered, and critically endangered (Adeiyongo 2006). According to Adeiyongo, the safe languages are those that are spoken by both children and adults in the ethnic group, while the endangered ones are those that most children in that ethnic group no longer learn, leaving its usage to adults only, and the critically endangered languages are those that are approaching extinction and have only a few old speakers. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), warns that a language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it or when it is used in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains and when the people cease to pass it from one generation to the next (2003a). The importance of indigenous languages to any culture cannot be over emphasized. For instance, Adeiyongo (2006, 3) emphasized that, “when a language dies, the people who speak it also die.” This is because language is an embodiment of a people’s culture and values. This is better summarized by the Kenyan literary giant, Ngugi Wa Thiong’O who said that “language is the carrier of a people’s culture and culture is the carrier of people’s values, and values are the carrier of a people’s outlook” (Adeiyongo 2006, 3).

Meaning and Importance of Mother Language Instruction

The term ‘*mother language*’ is synonymous with *mother tongue* (MT), *native language* (NL), and *first language* (L_1), which UNESCO (2003b, 15) has defined as “the language which a person acquires in early years and which normally becomes their natural instrument of thought and communication.” Another definition by Skutnabb-Kangas (1984, 18) states that it is the language one learns first; the language one identifies with or is identified as a native by others; the language one knows best; or a language one uses most:

Criterion	Definition
ORIGIN	the language one learned first
IDENTIFICATION a. internal b. external	a. the language one identifies with b. the language one is identified as a native speaker of by others
COMPETENCE	the language one knows best
FUNCTION	the language one uses most

Children learn their first language chiefly from those who very often stay around them, namely care givers, siblings, extended family members, and parents, especially the mother with whom more time is spent. Arguably, the mother's influence on the child is greater than any other person. For this reason, many tend to call it mother language or mother tongue (Udu 2015). At the time of learning the MT, no other language interferes with the process. This makes the child to master this language to the point of perfection. The significance of the MT has made UNESCO to make its teaching mandatory. The teaching of the mother tongue or its use in teaching the subject content of other subjects is what is called *mother tongue instruction*. UNESCO (2003b) describes *mother tongue instruction* as the use of the learners' mother tongue as a medium of instruction or the use of the mother tongue as a subject of instruction.

Mother language instruction is useful in a number of ways:

1. It is the transit language between the home and school. The school setup is noticeably different from the child's home setup. The physical outlook and environment, the people, the social relations, the play objects, including the language of interaction are different. The absence of the child's parents, family members and other formal conditions already mentioned can make the child feel insecure and develop a phobia for school. But once the child is allowed to interact with his peers and teachers in his mother language, such a child feels more secure and begins to see the school as an extension of the home. More fundamental is the fact that at that stage if introduced to a language other than his mother's, the child faces "a double set of challenges...the challenge of learning a new language but also learning new knowledge contained in that language" (UNESCO 2003b, 15). When children are allowed to begin their school life in the mother tongue, it makes the break between home and school as small as possible (UNESCO 1953, 48).
2. The mother tongue is suitable for beginning literacy skills, namely reading and writing. Through the mother tongue, the teachers will be able to build easily on the prior knowledge and first-hand experience the child has, which is relevant for introducing new knowledge.

3. The child's thoughts are always tied to his mother tongue. Using the mother tongue, and particularly relating new knowledge to these thoughts encourages the child to develop love for learning.
4. The process of evaluating the child's learning progress at this early stage is mainly through the oral medium. At this early stage, oral expression is both a major medium of evaluation and an end product of evaluation. Often times, the teacher evaluates learning by asking questions and eliciting responses orally. But if the medium of communication between the child and his teacher(s) is alien to the child, both the purpose for transmitting knowledge and evaluating it are not achieved.
5. By using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction, it makes the achievement of intercultural education advocated by UNESCO (2003a) possible. It is hoped that using the mother tongue as a tool for intercultural education will bring about effective confederacy and understanding among peoples and communities. This is particularly pertinent to pluralistic cultures like the ones in Nigeria where the citizens are members of nearly four hundred ethnic groups (Bamgbose 1971).

Theoretical Framework

In its report entitled *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*, UNESCO (1953) made the following fundamental submission:

It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium. (11)

The mother tongue provides the child cognitive competence as he moves towards learning a second language. This assumption can be supported using the thresholds theory to explain the degree of relationship between cognition and bilingualism. According to Baker (2006, 171), this theory was postulated by Cummins (1976, 19) and

Toukomaa and Skutnabb-Kangas (1977, 3). These theorists believe that the conceptual knowledge developed in one language makes it easier for the learning of additional languages. Cognition and bilingualism are linked to the idea of two thresholds, each threshold representing the level of competence that has consequences for a child (Baker 2006, 172). The proponents of this theory liken this model to a house with three floors, lower, middle and top (Baker 2006, 172). The lower floor represents children with limited or low levels of competence in both languages, the middle floor represents children with age-appropriate competence in one but not two languages, while the third and topmost represents children with age-appropriate competence in both languages. Cummins (2000, 26) argues that the conceptual knowledge developed in one language helps to make input in the other language comprehensible. This goes to suggest that the set of skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge gained from the mother tongue provides a very concrete linguistic base for second language learning.

Indicators that Tiv Language is Becoming Critically Endangered

Even though English remains the official language of many African countries, room is still given for the teaching of the mother tongue looking at the strategic role the mother tongue plays in formal education. In Nigeria, English has been an official language as far back as the period of colonial administration. This has made English to gain so much roots that it now poses a threat to the survival of indigenous languages. This view is based on the following major indicators:

1. Policy pronouncements of government. The policy pronouncements of government favour English language over and above indigenous languages. In the National Policy on Education, the duration given for English language instruction is far longer than mother tongue instruction. Whether we go by the 6-3-3-4 system as it used to be called or 9-3-4 as it is currently called, the entire period for teaching indigenous languages is only three years while English language teaching takes the entire sixteen years of formal education. This means, even during the three years of mother tongue instruction, English competes with it.

- a. Another government policy is that a credit pass in English language is a passport to higher education and even paid

employment. This makes many people prefer English to indigenous languages.

- b. Despite government legislation that mother tongue instruction should be in place in the first three years of the child, some schools, especially privately owned schools go against this policy and prohibit not just the teaching but the use of indigenous languages even for the purpose of interpersonal communication during school hours. The same problem is faced in Tiv speaking areas. Udu (2013) had decried that “Tiv is sparingly taught in primary and secondary schools in Benue State. Where it is offered at all it is at the discretion of the headmaster or principal. And in most cases, the teachers to teach the language are lacking. Furthermore, because Tiv is not offered at the primary and secondary school levels, students who gain admission to study it at the NCE level find it difficult to cope with it (196).”
- c. English language is the major medium of instruction in nearly all subjects (including French) at all levels of education. Students who do not learn indigenous language have nothing to lose, but this is not the case with English language. Besides, most of the textbooks used in Nigerian schools are written in English and only very insignificant numbers are written in or translated from English to Tiv. Hence, if a child acquires skills only in Tiv language, his readership across disciplines is limited.
- d. The communicative usefulness of English language makes it a more attractive language than the indigenous languages. English is used for international communication and scholarship while the indigenous languages are not. Therefore, parents who want their children to study in foreign countries or take to lucrative professions like law, pharmacy, medicine, architecture, etc. encourage them to study in schools where English language teaching and learning is pursued with vigour to help them achieve their dreams.

2. Socio-economic and cultural conditions. Some socio-economic and cultural conditions make English language teaching more attractive than mother tongue instruction. For example, English is the dominant language of local and international trade, worship and social events.

- a. The pluralistic nature of Nigeria makes English to assume an unequalled relevance as a neutral and rescue language to cater for the linguistic inadequacies of other ethnic groups.
 - b. The rise of private nursery and primary schools to challenge the quality of education offered in public schools is to the advantage of English language teaching. The target of the proprietors and head teachers of such schools is to produce students that are ‘English’ to the core.
 - c. In Nigeria, the use of English language confers high social status on its users. It has become a symbol of identifying people who belong to an elitist class. A person who speaks good English automatically commands respect from his listeners, for he is associated with those who have attained high level of education. On the other hand, people who speak only Tiv language or bastardized aspects of English language called pidgin are associated with the low status group in Tivland. This practice has become the norm even among the Tiv clergymen of the *Nongo u Kristu u i Ser u sha Tar* (NKST) Church. NKST is the Church that pioneered the development of Tiv language; one expects that as the custodian of Tiv language, they should show more commitment to the use of Tiv language. Sadly, one notices that where sometimes members of the congregation are entirely Tiv speakers, the clergy tends to punctuate his sermon by code switching and code-mixing English words here and there where the sermon is supposed to be conducted entirely in Tiv language. One obvious reason is that the speaker wants to impress on his congregation to note that he is educated. Surprisingly, NKST Church is an institution well known for her strong advocacy for the use of Tiv language in all her activities. Since many people want to be identified as educated, when they meet others, they tend to use English language rather than their native language.
3. Attitudinal indicators: Some elitist parents discourage communication in indigenous languages even among family members. This development makes the use of indigenous languages even for purpose of interpersonal communication to decline. There is also the problem of declining cultural lifestyles and practices even among the natives. This point has been stressed by Swande and Udu (2015):

More and more Tiv parents today prefer to hold family discussions with their children in English. Tiv language is sparingly used both at home and in the work place. Cultural activities such as storytelling and riddles are fast giving way for home movies and western sports monitored via television and satellite. Consequently, Tiv children prefer to use English as the language of play and dialogue. (108)

The irony is that when the children of elitist families go to their villages they require interpreters to communicate with their extended family members. By race, such children are Tiv, but linguistically they are English children. Hence they remain a hybrid of two cultures.

Need to use Tiv Language as a Major Medium of Instruction at the Primary School Level

At present, Tiv Language is sparingly used in primary schools as a major medium of instruction, contrary to UNESCO (1953) declaration that:

...every person has right to the language, traditions and insights of his ancestors and he is culturally deprived if he is cut off from them by receiving his whole education and orientation to the modern world through a foreign language.

Section 2(a) of the National Policy on Education (FRN 2004) has stipulated that the language of the child's environment should be used as the major medium of instruction. In spite of this, many primary schools in Tivland use English language as a medium of instruction. This appears to be the new trend among the Third World countries including Nigeria to replace the foreign languages as the major medium of instruction throughout the primary education level (Siann & Ugwuegbu 1980, 214). This is because according to them there is now dissatisfaction with the use of non-indigenous languages as the primary language of instruction. Besides, Fafunwa (1975, 219) asserted that a child learns best in his mother-tongue and that the mother-tongue is natural to him as the mother's milk.

Furthermore, the teaching of the indigenous languages in primary schools should be encouraged among the minority ethnic groups. People are sensitive about their language, its rights in a multilingual society and they often resist efforts to introduce a national language for fear that it may eventually submerge their own (De Blij 1977, 181). According to De Blij (1977), the Indian government's efforts to achieve linguistic uniformity through the promotion of Hindi as a lingua franca produced resistance and violent riots in some areas. Similarly, Kenyan newspapers at the time of the 1974 election scoffed at the archaic rule making it compulsory for candidates to pass an English test. In Nigeria, efforts by the successive governments to enshrine in the nation's Constitution one indigenous language as a lingua franca have not been successful.

Allowing children to learn their mother tongue in addition to a second language is to the advantage of such children. Singh (2012) argues that the language policy where the mother tongue is encouraged alongside with a national and foreign language is important since it helps the children to acquire more knowledge and different levels of competence.

Recommendations

The following suggestions have been offered to save Tiv language from becoming extinct.

1. The provision of section 2(a) of the National Policy on Education (FRN 2004) on the use of the language of the child's environment should be enforced. If this is done, the teaching of Tiv Language in primary schools, and the use of it as a major medium of instruction would no longer be discretionary. All privately owned primary schools should adhere to this provision and stiff penalty should be meted out to schools and teachers who violate it.
2. Federal and State Ministries of Education should monitor and ensure that all schools comply with the directive to teaching the languages of the immediate environment, and no school should place a ban on the use of vernacular languages by the pupils while they are in the class and outside the class.

3. Tiv parents, including the elite, should encourage the use of Tiv language in their homes, no matter where they live. Parents can purchase Tiv readers and films and encourage their children as part of their leisure time to read such readers and in addition frequently watch the abundant films acted in Tiv. This will make their children develop a love for Tiv language and culture.
4. More teachers should be trained in Tiv language both at the NCE and degree levels. They should be given automatic employment to teach in primary and secondary schools on their graduation.
5. The Government of Benue State should ensure that Tiv language is taught beyond primary three. Instead it should be offered to SS III level and made an examinable subject in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination.
6. Benue State University, Makurdi and University of Mkar should run degree programmes in Tiv Language and offer automatic admission to candidates who hold NCE in Tiv Language and are desirous to read Tiv language at a degree level.
7. As part of the commitment to the development of Tiv language, Tiv language should also be offered at the Reformed Theological Seminary, the only seminary established by NKST. This will encourage priests trained at the seminary to continue to use Tiv language for purpose of evangelism.
8. The Government of Benue State, wealthy individuals, and organizations should provide scholarship schemes for those who want to pursue Tiv Language studies at tertiary levels of education. They should also provide financial support to research efforts of some individuals so that such individuals can publish more books in Tiv Language to be used in primary and secondary schools. Similarly, the Benue State Government should set up a committee to plan a curriculum in Tiv Language that spans from primary to tertiary institutions. The government should support the committee so that Tiv Language is included in the National Curriculum as one of the national languages to be taught in secondary schools across the country.
9. Older Tiv men should not hesitate to correct the youths on the spot whenever they observe that such youths have not used Tiv

Language appropriately. This can also be done, for instance, during story-telling at night.

Conclusion

The death of Tiv language is eminent if Tiv people themselves continue to show a negative attitude to their language. Already government policy formulations, socio-economic and cultural conditions do not favour the existence and sustainability of Tiv language. Tiv elite, parents, the church and the Government of Benue State have to wake up and save Tiv language from becoming endangered. If we let our children develop the love for Tiv language and culture, the prospects of Tiv remaining a strong minority language are evident. Even in terms of population, the Tiv people have over six million speakers in Nigeria and the Cameroon. The Tiv people should not only be known for their numbers alone but more importantly by their language. It can be said with emphasis that a language is known to be alive when their speakers use it for different communicative purposes. More hope lies in the survival of Tiv language if our children are taught the language and are allowed to learn the curricular content of other subjects through Tiv language.

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