

## **WHEN MOTHER LANGUAGE IS DELIBERATELY REDUCED TO ZERO!**

### **Background Information**

The colonial masters were the first set of people responsible for reduction of mother language to zero in this country. When they came, we were made to believe that English was the language of the civilized people and Yoruba for instance, was the language of the primitives, all in attempt to promote and project English. We were fined and brutally beaten for speaking Yoruba, labelled as vernacular. Unfortunately, we believed them and we are still keeping faith with this servitudinal indoctrination till today. If not, I don't know any culture or country of the world who does not use its mother language for education – France, Germany, Russia, Japan, China, India are all using their languages for education and they are thriving. They have invented several sophisticated technological devices and some other things with it for development of their country's economies.

The second set of people culpable for reducing mother language to zero in this country are Nigerians, especially the educated who always embrace wholeheartedly everything British to the detriment of their own. And who should know better that the kind of education given to us is the one that makes us feel so alienated to others in every area of our lives. For instance, when a vehicle hits another vehicle on the highway, the next thing is the exchange of elevated English that shows one is superior to other rather than resolving issues amicably using soothing expressions in mother language. We pay attention to speaker at functions monitoring his mouth for grammatical blunders in English for us to deride or ridicule him as if English is the passport for entering the gate of heaven. 'Ohun ti wa kì í wù wá, tí ẹ̀niẹ̀lẹ̀nì níí yá wa lára'.

It is no longer news that the present Minister of Education of this country announced the reversal of the 2022 National Language Policy blaming it on poor performance of students at a time when UNESCO'S global recommendations have consistently revealed that mother language-based multilingual education improves comprehension, retention and long-term academic success. At a time when UNICEF also emphasized that learning in the mother tongue is the best start to education and is vital for academic success and can reduce school dropout. Without sounding immodest, reversal of this nature has no connection with logic, science and sociolinguistic reality of Nigeria, and has erased decades of linguistic progress and undermined importance of mother language and what it represents.

### **What is Mother Language?**

Scholars all over the world have made attempt to define mother language and its importance with little or no difference in their attempts. In their views, mother language is the first language an individual is exposed to from birth, forming the foundation for cognitive, emotional, and social development. It is viewed as pivotal for identity formation, cultural transmission, and pedagogical effectiveness, offering a natural medium for conceptualizing the world. UNESCO defines it as the language spoken in an individual's home in their early years. It is considered as the primary expression of an individual's identity, encoding a community's values, history and social norms. It is also defined as the language spoken in a region, often linked to an ethnic group, and typically acquired without formal instruction (Pavetra & Ilangkumaran 2025; Buddhadev 2024; Tahimic, 2024; Akintunde & Akuta 2021; Haval 2021; Akinsanya 2019; Murmu 2014; Elugbe 1990; Fafunwa 1989).

In essence, scholarly consensus holds that the mother language is not merely a tool for communication, but an essential component of human psychology, culture and cognitive development.

### **Importance of Mother Language**

A significant number of scholars have testified to the importance of mother language in their works. Prominent among them are Neeraj (2016; Alemayehu 2015; Brown 2000). They are of the views that mother language is incontrovertibly treasured and significant due to numerous reasons. Here are the key importance of mother language:

#### *1. Cognitive development and learning*

Making early education accessible in mother language enhancing perfect understanding, critical thinking and literacy skills. It functions as a basis that makes learning additional languages easier.

#### *2. Cultural Identity and Heritage*

It serves as a natural connection of individuals to their roots, heritage, and traditions, playing a vital role in preservation of cultural diversity and prevention of loss of cultural identity.

*3 Improved Communication with family and community members, solidifying social bonds and enabling vivid expression of feelings and ideas.*

#### *4. Emotional and Psychological Development*

The mother language assists in influencing a child's thoughts, emotions, and self-esteem as well as making provision for a secured foundation for personality development.

### *5. Educational Effectiveness*

It has been established in the past that children who start their education in their mother language tend to perform better academically and have lower dropout rates compared to those forced to learn in a foreign language. In this regards, Babatunde Fafunwa's Ife 6 experiment comes to mind where twelve pupils were grouped into two using English medium to teach a science course for one group and Yoruba for other. It was revealed that those thought in Yoruba performed better than their English counterpart.

### **Challenges Facing Mother Language in Nigeria.**

Challenges facing mother language in Nigeria are numerous and huge primarily because of the extreme linguistic diversity, poor policy planning/policy summersault which sometimes leads to reversal to English as the only medium of giving instruction in the classroom like the one the present Minister for Education has just embarked upon in primary schools. The following are the key challenges facing the use of mother language in the country:

#### *1. Parental and Societal Resistance*

Many parents, educators, and community members are guilty of this because of the negative views that English language is essential for global competitiveness and higher education and this leads to apathy towards learning in the mother language. This group of people are in the habit of speaking English to their children at home and at all times forgetting that it has been established long ago that a child has capacity to learn and acquire more than two languages at his or her early stage of development. To them, it is for better economic opportunities and global competitiveness, reducing mother language instruction to zero and as a disadvantage. Indeed, some are good in speaking impeccable English but not fluent in speaking their mother

language while others are neither here nor there in terms of the two languages. It is disturbing seeing an elite parent born and developed in Nigeria, struggling with his mother language at a function where he is expected to address audience in his native language. The next thing you will hear here is 'could you please permit me to express myself in English?' Or 'permit me to code-mix in Yoruba and English. It is obvious that English is the only language used in his house and his children will find it extremely difficult to speak their mother language.

### *2. Linguistic Diversity and Urbanisation*

Nigeria is blessed with over 500 languages and this sometimes, makes choosing a medium of instruction very difficult. Rapid urbanisation is also a challenge to the mother language proficiency because it leads to mixed-language classrooms, making it hard to use one native language. Rapid urbanisation also means many children grow up speaking English or Nigerian Pidgin, rendering them less proficient in the native language.

### *3. Shortage of Qualified Teachers/preference for English*

There is a lack of trained teachers proficient in teaching, reading and writing in indigenous languages. About 14 percent of teachers have access to relevant mother language materials thereby forcing reliance on English. The English language is viewed by the society as language of the civilized essential for global competitiveness and higher education. Nobody wants to study any of the indigenous languages in University again because of this discrimination. For instance, if you are studying Yoruba, you may be labelled as Babalawo or Elewe omo and all sort of other derogatory nomenclatures. This negative attitude towards studying indigenous languages is the cause of low enrolment for the course in our Universities. And when students show no interest in the indigenous languages, the effect is shortage of teachers to teach the course.

#### *4. Lack of Learning Resources*

Learning resources include textbooks, curricular, and audio-visual materials in local languages affects implementation. The few teachers of indigenous languages on ground are not motivated to produce text books by government and the society. It is perceived as an effort in futility to produce books without patronage from the students, government and the society. As a matter of fact, it is of no economic value. Apart from the textbook issue, audio-visual materials, instructional materials and other modern gargets for teaching indigenous languages are lacking in our schools.

#### *5. Weak Policy Implementation/Poor policy planning/Policy summersault*

The National Language Policy always suffers from a lack of political will, insufficient planning, and underfunding. When experts in the field of indigenous language are not consulted and involved in the national policy making and implementation, negative policy reversal and summersault is bound to happen like the one we are experiencing now in which the 2022 policy, which initially mandated mother language usage in early education, was reversed in late 2025 by the present Minister of Education, due to poor implementation, lack of proper groundwork and alleged corruption.

#### *6. Lack of Technical Vocabulary*

It is true that many mother languages lack standardized terminology for academic subjects, like mathematics and science, creating barriers in pedagogical delivery.

### **The Way Out**

The way out to challenges facing the use of mother language in Nigeria requires change of attitude towards our local languages from parents,

government and every member of the society. The onus is on us to embrace and promote our indigenous languages and stop reducing them to zero. The other germane ways out to these challenges include:

### *1. Policy Implementation and Enforcement*

There should be urgent effort on the part of government to enforce the use of mother language or language of the immediate community in early childhood and primary education. As a matter of urgency, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu should revisit the 2022 policy shift to ensure that the reversal to English only does not erase gains in early learning.

### *2. Training and Resource Development*

Qualified teachers proficient in local languages should be recruited and properly trained. Encourage and empower them to write text books in local languages. Develop and distribute textbooks and learning materials in indigenous languages. Technology like AI should be leveraged to translate and create teaching material materials, especially for documented languages.

### *3. Addressing Linguistic Diversity*

Having linguistic multiplicity is not a problem and should not be. It should even be a blessing to us in this country with robust planning and policy. Government should adopt flexible local-level approaches in urban, linguistically mixed classrooms. For instance, adoption of dominant local language could be a solution.

### *4. Shifting Attitude and Awareness*

Launch public awareness campaigns to reframe the mother language as a valuable tool for cognitive development and not just a vernacular. Campaign of this nature should educate people to see the need to use

mother language at all time. Language can die a natural death if it is not used and nurtured by owners. Latin was once a world language, today, Latin is no more in existence. Awareness can also be created by combating the stigma that is reducing mother language to zero and linking English to high and enviable status.

### *5. Community and Media Engagement*

The use of mother languages in local media, literature and technology should be encouraged. It is also imperative for government and the society to promote and project cultural celebrations that showcase the core value of local languages.

### 6. Making Technical Vocabulary Available

The only way to do this is to encourage research in this regards as well as empowering researchers and experts whose area of discipline is on technical vocabulary, language engineering and New Idioms to develop new expressions for fresh inventions in science and technology alien to our culture.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, and in view of all that have been said, one may be tempted to ask 'why is government and society trying to reduce mother language to zero? It is not enough to say that in globalized world, it is more important than ever to be able to communicate in multiple languages. This does not mean we should forget our mother language which is the foundation for learning other languages, which helps to better understanding of our culture and identity, which gives room for communication with our family and community members who may not speak other languages, which can give us competitive advantage over others in the job market, which helps us to have better

understanding of nuances and refinements of language itself, which is the language of politics, finance, marketing and transaction elsewhere in Japan, India, China etc.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us use this unique day of celebration of the international mother language day to echo this saying to the hearing of those at the helm of affairs in Nigeria and the society at large – STOP REDUCING MOTHER LANGUAGE TO ZERO! IT WILL DEFINITELY BACKFIRE! ỌRỌ YÍ MÁA NÍ Ẹ̀YÌN! Thank you all.

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