

## EXCELLENT MASTERY OF MOTHER TONGUE AS A CATALYST TO EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE BY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

**Martin Amaechi Ph.D**  
08033050796  
mikamaechi@yahoo.com

**Ngozi Ohakamma**  
08062779152  
livypat@yahoo.com

### **Abstract**

*Stakeholders in education have done so much and put in so much effort at finding a remedy to high rate of failure in English Language examinations in both internal and external examinations, yet the problem persists. However, it is the belief of these researchers that the solution to the above problem is not far-fetched - all hands must be on deck to make our children grounded in our mother tongue, as a stepping stone to engendering better performance in other subjects including the English Language. This is the major reason behind the different provisions in the National Policy in Education that our children be taught in their mother tongue in the formative years. If only we can implement these provisions, it will be the beginning of the end to poor performance in English Language. Both mother tongue and English are languages, so when we expose the child early to the mother tongue, it will trigger off an excellent performance in English Language in later years.*

### **Introduction**

English Language has continued to play dominant role in the political and economic power of Nigeria. According to Onyekwere and Nkoro (2007), it is today the language of governance, research, commerce and business. Again, owing to its official nature in Nigeria it has become the language for all official transactions in the three tiers of government. In educational institutions, it is the language of instruction. In fact, the issue of passing English Language at credit level before gaining admission into tertiary institutions has on its own, dressed the language with the "aura of a colossus," according to Onyekwere and Nkoro (2007:40).

Without English, communication would almost have been impossible, given the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria with numerous cultures and linguistic backgrounds of over 250 ethnic languages. English has therefore made it possible for Nigerians to accommodate one another. At the foreign scene, English is the language of diplomacy, political maneuver and economic viability, as it assures accessibility to global funds and aids.

Unfortunately, with all the above roles English plays, attempt to learn it by students has not been very encouraging, judging from the past achievement of students in the subject in internal and external examinations. According to Durojaiye (2007), who defined achievement as success in reaching a particular goal, status or standard; or as exceptional performance in learning what has been taught; students perform poorly in all the areas in which WAEC examiners judge candidates, a situation which the scholar attributes to poor training in the language skills. This low achievement in English examinations both at internal and external levels is already worrisome. It is against this background that seminars, workshops and high-level conferences have been organized by stakeholders to unravel the causes of this malady, which has continued to frustrate many students by denying them admission into higher institutions.

Incidentally, one area that is yet to be looked into in effort to improve students' learning of English is the impact of students' explicit knowledge of the mother tongue in their learning of the English Language. Explicit knowledge as a construct implies a clear, wholesome understanding and awareness of mother tongue structure, grammar, vocabulary and lexis. Unfortunately, parents do not encourage their children to learn or speak our mother tongue because they see children who speak their mother tongue as inferior or backward. According to Nguyen (2009) many students would not have been attending classes in mother tongue if it were not a condition for registration for school certificate examination. Many of them therefore attend classes for the sake of formality, not that they love their mother tongue.

Section 1, sub-section 8 (g) of the National Policy on Education, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition (FRN 2013), recognizing the role awareness and explicit knowledge of mother tongue plays in learning, insists that "every child shall be taught in the mother tongue or in the language of the immediate community for the first four years of basic education... every child shall learn one major Nigerian language." (FRN, 2013 (13).

Section 2, sub-section 20(b) also states that "the medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first three years" (FRN, 2013(8). This is a welcome development because in studying English, a considerable knowledge of mother tongue is necessary since the child grounded in mother tongue thinks in it but writes down his thoughts in English. Even English essays with cultural contents are best written by students with good knowledge of their culture, which is embedded in their mother tongue. Actually, language and culture are inseparable.

According to Anukam (1995:76), it (mother tongue explicit knowledge) ought to be a curricular challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, aimed at discovering a "technology for improving students' English Language and at the same time, evoking their cultural awareness." According to her, writing essays on folklore topics (which are culture-laden) can help students discover and identify with their culture, as well as increase their performance in English Language. Therefore one way of making our children to achieve proficiency in English is to return to our mother tongue and be grounded in it because proficiency in it will lead to proficiency in English.

### **Wrong Perception of Mother Tongue by Second Language Speakers of English**

The government of Nigeria recognizes the importance of mother tongue in the overall development of the child; hence, it stipulates that it be used as a medium of instruction in both pre-primary and primary levels of education. The essence is to enable the child to identify with the happenings at school via his/her mother tongue. The government, therefore, in section two (2), sub-section sixteen (16) (j) of the National Policy on Education (2013:6), states that "government shall ensure that the medium of instruction (at nursery level) is principally the mother tongue.

Unarguably, the essence of the above provision in the National Policy on Education is to make the child grounded in his mother tongue as a prelude to effective learning of other subjects, including English Language, hence, effective learning of English Language and other subjects, to an extent, depends on a child's measure of knowledge of his mother tongue, (Oden, 2008). Speaking any language is the bedrock of its survival hence, any language not spoken is dead, (Amaechi and Ohakamma 2014).

Ironically, many Nigerians are ignorant of the importance of the mother tongue, neither are they proud of it, hence, they do not speak it. Opara (2009) posits that mother tongue is more or less stigmatized and considered an unsuitable medium of instruction in schools or even an unsuitable thing to be taught. According to him, parents, especially those living in urban areas are proud to declare that their children cannot speak, read, let alone write their mother tongue.

The consequence of this trend, according to him, is the production or emergence of a generation of children cut off from their cultural roots. According to Amaechi and Ohakamma (2014) again, mother tongue is considered a taboo in most schools and also perceived as inferior to the English Language. It is often associated with low socio-economic and academic status, compared to English Language which to them, commands respect, prestige and has high socio-economic connotation. Maduagwu (2008) however, chips in a remedy to reverse the trend. He advises that mother tongue be spoken at home and should be given a first language status. The blame goes to parents, who neither speak mother tongue to their children nor interact with it at home, thereby stripping the children of their linguistic and human right. They also have a word of caution to some traditional rulers, the so-called custodians of culture, who neither speak their mother tongue even in their meetings nor interact with their subjects in it. They are more comfortable in English Language than in the mother tongue.

As a panacea to the dwindling awareness and knowledge of our mother tongue, Amaechi and Ohakamma (2014) suggest the use of information and computer technology (ICT) in boosting mother tongue teaching and learning at schools and in the homes. They advocate the use of computers, internet, radio, television, video conferencing, telephony, satellite, computer-mediated conferencing etc, to generate, store, process, retrieve and disseminate mother tongue information. According to them, today's children can easily access the internet and engage in computer and video games, hence they advise parents to provide their children with localized video games and literature texts converted into cartoons in the mother tongue. Home videos acted in mother tongue or subtitled in it should also be provided to enable children learn to speak their mother tongue and be grounded in its vocabulary and grammar.

On the part of the government, they should ensure that schools have qualified mother tongue teachers. The law on the exclusive use of mother tongue in teaching in pre-primary and primary 1-3 should be strictly enforced and perhaps extended to secondary and tertiary institutions by making mother tongue studies a general course. They also advise the electronic media to air some of their programmes in mother tongue as well as create sensitization campaigns in mother tongue. The fear and widely-held rumour that the use of mother tongue at the early stage hampers the learning and acquisition of English should be completely dismissed.

Awareness and explicit knowledge of mother tongue vocabulary, grammar and structures lie in the hands of agents of socialization, (Ezuoke, 2014). He says that any attempt to stop the child from learning his mother tongue as his first language, smolders the child's language acquisition device (LAD) which constitutes an impediment to the cognitive development of the child. The church as another agent of socialization, according to Ezuoke (2014) should ensure that services in mother tongue must not be introduced with English Language, which is what is obtainable now. According to him, children learn mother tongue vocabularies a lot in prayers, sermons, songs and testimonies.

### **Challenges Facing Mother Tongue Teaching and Learning**

Mother tongue scholars are of the opinion that the greatest challenge facing mother tongue explicit knowledge is the failure of the home in executing its function of giving the child the opportunity of acquiring his mother tongue as his first language. According to them, the home is the first and foremost environment in which a child learns to speak, hence, the language he listens to at this early formative stage is the one he recognizes and learns to speak. It therefore follows that where the home fails to execute this function, the child picks up the next language spoken by his parents and peers. Ezuoke (2014) reports that there is need for parents, who are the child's first teachers to speak their mother tongue to him as the first step towards the child's awareness and explicit knowledge of mother tongue vocabulary and grammar.

He is also of the opinion that many indigenous languages in Nigeria lack official orthography, thereby hampering efforts to print books on them. Such languages are only spoken but not written, a phenomenon that may create opportunity for extinction. According to him, this situation makes it extremely difficult for speakers to be very versed in the knowledge of the vocabularies and grammar of such languages. One advantage of official orthography, according to Ezuoke (2014), is that more words are created and added to the vocabulary of that language as it is being revised.

Ugo, Abah *et al* (2014) identified lack of a clear and enduring language policy in the educational sector as a major challenge to mother tongue awareness and knowledge. To this end, they suggested to government to include Nigerian languages among the compulsory subjects in the school curriculum at both the junior and senior levels. Furthermore, Ugo, Abah, *et al* (2014), still on the issue of a language policy, called on government to fund the development of a national policy for Nigerian languages as well as to restore the language provision of 1977 which identified three major Nigerian languages for study at junior secondary level.

### **Mother Tongue: A Catalyst towards Effective Learning of English Language**

In a study titled: Effects of Awareness and Explicit Knowledge of Mother Tongue Grammar on Learning of Foreign Languages, Hassanzader (2011) used 40 English As a Foreign Language Students (EFL) of 17-25 years old, all native Azerbaijani Turkish speakers of East Azerbaijan in Tabriz. The subjects in the control group and experimental group were all Iranians who had all experienced English learning at school and different language institutes. To make two homogeneous groups, the researcher administered the modified HBJ Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) test.

In the research, two teacher-made grammar tests were utilized both in Turkish and English. Another instrument was a teacher-made questionnaire which had 20 questions and given to the experimental group who had experienced learning in their mother tongue. To be sure about the homogeneity of both groups, the HBJ TOEFL was administered to the learners. The results showed that they were homogeneous. They were then, randomly assigned to the control group and experimental group. In the experimental group, from the manuals of the teachers, the Turkish grammar (simple present, simple past, present progressive and future) were first taught in Turkish language.

Teaching in mother tongue in the experimental group was an attempt to create language awareness, as the learners had no or very little knowledge of Azerbaijani Turkish language. Then the same grammars, from *Intro-interchange Third Edition* were taught in English Language to the

experimental group. They were taught simple present, simple past, present progressive and future. Both groups received the same amount of instruction. Finally, the learners were provided with a written essay examination titled - Life: Past, Present and Future.

The process of data collection followed these steps: HBJ TOEFL, the pretest, English version, the first achievement test, writing the modified post-test, the result of Pearson Correlation Coefficient. Then the results were subjected to statistical analysis using t-test to find out whether the learners' awareness of mother tongue had an impact on the achievement of foreign language or not. The obtained frequencies and percentages were put in tables. The findings suggested that learners' awareness of mother tongue had a positive effect on their learning of English Language grammar: learners who received awareness in mother tongue were more successful than those who did not.

There was also a quasi-experimental study which compared senior secondary students' mean scores in folklore essay (FE) and usual (traditional) essays (T.E). The F.E. essays, according to Anukam (1995), focused on the students' indigenous culture while the T.E essays focused on a borrowed culture. Put differently, the F.E essays focused on students' cultural background and by implication mother tongue-based, while T.E. focused on students' foreign culture typified by English Language. By the way, language and culture are inseparable, according to Anukam (1995).

Anukam was gingered into this research having seen the Igbo students torn apart in the ongoing war between English language on one hand and Igbo language and culture on the other hand. According to her, many authors "have lucidly portrayed the richness of Igbo folklore, and have convincingly demonstrated why students should learn them in the school" (75). Anukam's study was therefore looking for a technology for improving students' English language and at the same time evoking the cultural awareness. She therefore hypothesized that writing on folklore topics can help students to discover and identify with their culture and will by extension increase their performance in English.

The researcher sampled six schools in Nsukka Urban and subjected their six English teachers to ratings they were not aware of. From these six, four were selected and their schools automatically became the experimental schools for the study. Each teacher was then trained to carry out the teaching and testing of his school, using the researchers' selected topics and marking guides duly validated and tested for reliability. The genres covered were creative, argumentative, narrative and expository, one genre for each school.

The study covered the three classes of the senior secondary. On the whole, 237 students were involved and each student wrote two essays: one traditional (40 marks) and one folktale (40 marks). The major instruments for collecting data were 24 essay topics. The students' mean scores were then computed in percentage. Comparing the students' mean scores in T.E and F.E, it was observed that although the students' mean scores are a bit higher in T.E than in F.E, the students' cumulative mean is higher in F.E than T.E. thus they scored almost equally in F.E as in T.E, although the overall better performance may go to F.E as indicated by the cumulative mean.

The finding implies that students performed equally well in the two categories, pointing out that teachers should design more topics focusing on both indigenous and foreign cultures. Writing on both categories offer the learner a rare technology of full analysis, synthesis and realization of

himself as an individual as well as a culture member. In other words folklore (rooted in culture/mother tongue) is a great asset in the learner's bid to write a well-worded and intelligent essay.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Of a surety, there exists a correlation between students' explicit knowledge of mother tongue and high achievement in English Language, especially from the point of view of the reviews made in the paper, hence, we recommend that:

- Teachers of Igbo should ensure that students have good or explicit knowledge of Igbo to enable them do well in English language. English Language teachers should not hesitate to use Igbo in teaching students whose mother tongue is Igbo in some aspects of English Language they are having difficulty in understanding.
- Schools and parents should not forbid students from speaking Igbo rather they should ensure that they have explicit knowledge of it and use it very well as it will help them do well in English Language. The state ministries of education should make the study of Igbo compulsory in secondary schools.

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