

## Mother Tongue: A Powerful Language Learning Tool for Comprehension and Applicability of Knowledge in West Africa.

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**Abstract:** Language is a gift from God and the key components that defines human being, human interaction and good human relationship towards peace and progress in the society. Language intuitively occurs to human being and the process of language education starts from birth to involve verbal gestures like crying, smiling, laughing, giggling, non-verbal and para- language activities. As the child continues to grow, the mother obviously is the first teacher of Language. Hence, this paper is out to explore the significance of mother tongue as a natural language tool for comprehension and applicability of learning contents. The methodology is qualitative, interdisciplinary and content analytical. Language policies of selected African countries are equally studied and analysed. The formal learning that takes place in the school adopted one language or the other as a language of instruction, based on the historical circumstance. More than other continents' people, Africans are the victims of this circumstance. The adoption of the languages of the colonisers prevented not only comprehension but also applicability of the Knowledge gained. This is the problem the research work is going to address. Based on the importance of mother tongue, the paper suggests the use of mother tongue even in the teaching of technologically innovative subjects to enhance development in all ramifications. The paper recommends the institutionalisation of research in African indigenous Languages towards adaptation to modern technological demands.

**Key words:** identified i Mother- Tongue, ii Bilingual and Multilingual based Education and iii Language Policies

### I. Introduction

African people have uncommon endowments in the aspect of culture that include language, dance, music, verbal arts, crafts and other expressive arts. The development of African languages transcends the mere usage as a language of passing instruction. The super structural levels are estimated to be comprehension, practicality, out of which sustainability could be achieved. In fact, the effects of mother tongue can be positively overwhelming. It is also believed that no two languages can enjoy perfect and direct translation without losing parts of the meaning, but unfortunately, the long period of contact with the foreigners subjected Africans to undue cultural influence and the use of foreign languages to teach African Students right from the primary school to tertiary levels. For instance, West Africa is polarised along the line of Anglo, Franco and lithophone's divisions and the languages of the colonisers were adopted as the languages of instructions. Also, in the Eastern and the Southern parts of Africa, the colonial experience exposed many countries to foreign languages of instruction, other than the mother tongue. Even after the attainment of independence, cultural independence was yet to be achieved. Hence, mother tongue loss effects and integrity to culturally young Africans, who also lose their identity. Comprehension and practicality are the backbone of functional societies, but the use of languages other than mother tongue have so much denied Africans of the understanding of the mother tongue and acquiring enough vocabulary of the foreign language for deep learning to take place was equally a challenge. Hence, African child is neither here nor there.

### II. Methodology and the Scope of the work

The work relies on qualitative method of content analysis of the policies and its applicability in schools. The interdisciplinary nature of the research work shows the use of both historical and linguistic materials. The researchers made use of secondary resources, apart from the policies that are primary in nature.

The historical circumstance of the selected African countries also provided the desired background to the historical circumstance of each sample country.

The scope of this paper is the selected countries language policies from the western parts of Africa, to determine the language of instructions and the adoption of mother tongue and the indigenous languages. Five African Countries Language policies, as case study, were used. The language policies of these countries were assessed and their applicability in school after the pronouncement of policies.

<i>Selected West African Countries</i>
<i>Gambia</i>
<i>Mali</i>
<i>Cote de Ivoire</i>
<i>Ghana</i>
<i>Nigeria</i>

### III. Objectives of the study

- ❖ The general objective of the paper is to explore the significance of the mother tongue as a natural learning tool for comprehension and applicability of Knowledge.

Specifically, the research work intends to:

- ❖ Investigate into the languages of instruction of selected West African countries through their language policies in order to determine the use of mother tongue or not, as languages of instruction;
- ❖ Insinuate the development of indigenous language research to enhance deep comprehension and applicability of learning contents even in the areas of science and technology;
- ❖ Encourage cultural independence as a follow-up to the political independence of the African Countries.

#### The Conceptualisation of Mother Tongue

Research has shown that children who were taught in their mother tongue have a better understanding of concepts and have been able to develop critical thinking skills more easily than those who were taught in the second language. This is because a child's mother tongue is closely linked to their emotional and cognitive development.<sup>1</sup> In the UNESCO estimate<sup>2</sup>, 40% of the world's population does not have access to an education in a language they speak or understand. The reasons for the disappearance, at a very fast rate of many indigenous languages, together with the cultural and the intellectual heritage. The wealth of traditional heritage cannot be preserved without the deep knowledge of mother tongue. Some African countries have actually keyed in to the framework of bilingual or multilingual mother tongue-based education. Examples of countries like Djibouti, Gabon, Guinea, Kenya and Haiti<sup>3</sup> Mother Tongue in this case refers to the language of the immediate environment, which enabled the growing of an individual to become acceptable social being within the system. Mother tongue-based education is essential for inclusion and quality learning to improve learning outcome and academic performance. It is essential in primary school to avoid knowledge gaps and increase the speed of learning while multi-lingual education is also advocated for empowerment towards mutual understanding, respect and global interaction. Mother tongue plays an important role in all language learning; firstly, it is an important tool for teacher to clarify explanations, give instruction and provide translations, in many cases, a few translations in mother tongue can lead to a more efficient use of classroom time. it is a primary learning tool.<sup>4</sup> Mother tongue is used by all category of students either consciously or sub-consciously, which give them the opportunity of comparing the new learning concept with the mother tongue. More so, they plan, dream, brainstorm and do a lot of things naturally, in their mother tongue. Mother tongue is the foundation upon which all other forms of learning are built. It helps the development of the cognitive skills, to create awareness necessary for learning to take place. It is good for the retention of new information. Accentuating the significance of mother tongue, the UNESCO adopted 21<sup>st</sup> of February as the International Day of Mother Language, established at the initiatives of Bangladesh by UNESCO General Conference in 1999, essential for promoting cultural diversity.<sup>5</sup>

The mode of acquisition of mother tongue is without formal learning or formal instruction. Children learn from the immediate and extended family members, friends and acquaintances. While learning other languages, it serves as a reference point and can enhance the quick learning of the second language, Mother tongue is a source of happiness for the learners. Though may be an alienated experience, high repetition of classes and drop-out rates have been associated with learning in a language the child does not speak and understand.<sup>6</sup>

The benefits of acquiring mother tongue extends from easy understanding to comprehension, focus on the concept rather than wasting time to translate. It also enhances critical thinking, creativity, confidence and freedom of expression without the fear of making mistakes. It promotes better classroom performance.

The stigmatization of mother tongue and other indigenous languages was to destroy the sensibility and the confidence of Africans in order to promote the languages of the colonisers. This amounts to the loss of cultural identity and heritage and discourages further research in the indigenous language, history, culture and tradition, after all, mother tongue is a vessel of culture.<sup>7</sup> Another major problem of mother tongue is the global economy and interconnectivity. This made possible the reward of multilingualism in terms of global opportunities. Hence some African countries adopted the bilingual and multilingual-based education.

#### **Bilingual and Multilingual Mother-Tongue based Education**

Pushing forward for mother tongue, mother tongue-based bilingual methods have been suggested and also adopted in a number of African countries. Monolingual method in foreign language has been favoured but found not effective. Rather than reaching the level of Native speakers, learners were neither here nor there<sup>8</sup>. In order to improve students' confidence and communication, there was the advocacy for multilingual Education based on mother tongue right from the early years of schooling for inclusion, quality learning and improved academic performance. The unveiling of the world atlas of languages was an effort towards the bilingual and multilingual education for revitalising global linguistic diversity.<sup>9</sup> Suggested methods for achieving this are; recreational, imitational, trial and error, flash card and artificial linguistic setting methods. Some African countries have been canvassing for Mother-Tongue based Bilingual Education, especially, South Africa and Kenya. But for it to be effective, there must be alignment between educational policy, school curricula and initial Teacher Education. Neville Alexander, a proponent of the use of home languages in education. The argument that mother Tongue-based Education should be the future of African education. This step in right direction was necessary due to high cultural and linguistic diversity of South Africa, with 12 languages recognised as the official languages but English and Afrikaans are the most dominant for teaching and learning in school. Such situation creates barriers for effective comprehension, understanding, participation and academic success. Researches have shown that learners that are taught in mother tongue have better cognitive development, improved literacy, higher academic achievement and strong cultural identity and confidence<sup>10</sup> This was suggested for No-fee paying schools. The research also recommended strategies towards achieving this.

### **IV. Language Policies of Selected West African Countries**

#### **The Gambian Language policy**

In the West African nation of The Gambia, replacing an English-only language of instruction policy with a policy that supports local language-medium learning for children, from early childhood education through grade 3. Gambian education experts revealed<sup>11</sup> that the use of only English in the formal education system has done a great deal of damage to the country over the years and this new policy demonstrates the country's determination to end that damage to its young learners and their communities.<sup>12</sup>

The new policy responds to two serious concerns of the Gambian government:

- Concern about the low school performance of Gambian children. As early as the 1970s, Scholars and Researchers have been working on the correlations<sup>13</sup> between poor academic performance in Gambian schools and the language of instruction being used.
- The conviction that the current English-focused language in education policy and practices are hindering the maintenance of a strong national identity among Gambian citizens. That identity is multilingual, but the exclusion of Gambian languages in the classroom runs counter to national values of inclusion and identity.

These two problems of school failure and neglect of the Gambia's multilingual national identity are inextricably linked; they are problems that cannot be solved with simply another English-medium curriculum. Implementing this new policy will mean that seven national languages across the country will be used for teaching the entire lower basic curriculum: early-grade reading, mathematics, science and integrated social studies. English as a second language (ESL) will be taught through Grade 3, to prepare the learners for Grade 4, which will be a *year-long* process of transitioning from Gambian languages of instruction to English. Many so-called "transition" multilingual education programs don't give the learners more than a few weeks (if that much) to switch from the home language to an international language of instruction; so, this commitment to a year-long curriculum for making that transition is pretty exciting.

It's not a small task that The Gambia is facing to implement this innovative language in education policy in every early primary classroom in the country. Still, the benefits to learners, their communities and their nation will be great, as young learners develop into confident, successful students – as well as confident, thoughtful citizens.

While plans to develop a dedicated policy on languages are in place, there are both colonial and postcolonial constitutional, cultural, and educational pronouncements on language and language use. The policies are in practice at some public domains (law courts, hospitals, and the media), business and religious spaces but the explicit policy statements about languages and language use in educational policies remain on

paper. The lack of implementing policies is a subject of further investigation; however, the lack of commitment of the local elites or resistance to the Adapted Curriculum policy during the colonial administration is analysed and documented. Teaching of local languages, their use as media of instruction, and the relevance of education as bedrocks of the Adapted Curriculum may shape rethinking about languages in education and how to address attitudes and provisions of technical and vocational education.<sup>14</sup>

### **Mali's Language policy**

The new constitution had an overwhelming majority vote at 96.91, in the June 18 referendum, demoting French and removing its official status. French will still remain in use as a working language, but it will be replaced by 13 indigenous languages (Bambara, Bobo, Bozo, Dogon, Fula, Hassaniya, Kassonke, Maninke, Minyanka, Senufo, Songhay, Soninke, and Tamasheq), all of which will receive official language status.<sup>15</sup>

Mali has approximately 80 languages spoken across the country, of which a few including: Bambara, Bobo, Dogon, and Minianka, were granted national language status under a 1982 language bill.<sup>16</sup> The significant shift in the language policy of Mali was implemented as part of a larger referendum in the country, with the intention of creating the landlocked country's Fourth Republic. In 2022, the Malian military junta accused France of espionage and supplying arms to terrorists after their military withdrawal from the country. The strained relationship between the two countries has ultimately led to a rejection of French language and culture, in the wake of anti-French sentiment across West and Central Africa through the experience of more than ten coups attempts in 2020 to mark the end of eight years of political instability. This trend dramatically led to deteriorating ties with France and other western powers.<sup>17</sup> This was followed by the accusation by France against Mali of strong relationship with Russian. Mali's choice to embrace English as the new official language is rooted in several factors, ranging from colonial dominance after the attainment of independence to security threats, through France's support of insurgencies. While French has been the colonial language and the dominant medium of communication for decades, the rise of English as a global lingua franca has prompted many nations to reassess their language policies in light of international opportunities and challenges.<sup>18</sup>

One of the driving forces behind this move is Mali's desire to position itself as a more active player on the global stage. With English being widely used in international trade, diplomacy, and academia, adopting it as the official language presents Mali with a gateway to engage more effectively with the global community. English proficiency can enhance Mali's ability to attract foreign investments, foster international partnerships, and bolster its economy through increased trade and tourism.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, English's prevalence as the language of the internet, science, and technology has further fuelled the decision. By adopting English, Mali aims to bridge the digital divide and empower its citizens to access a vast repository of knowledge and innovation. This, in turn, can contribute to the country's socio-economic development, as access to information becomes more accessible to a broader segment of the population.<sup>20</sup>

The impact of this decision is expected to be multifaceted. Firstly, it could lead to a revitalization of indigenous languages that have faced marginalization over the years. Increased usage and recognition of these languages in official settings, educational institutions, and public discourse can strengthen local cultures and preserve traditional knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

### **Cote d'Ivoire Language policy**

The language policy of the colonial master can be summarized as the compulsory learning of French language to the detriment of local languages; and the education system stands as the most suitable for implementing it. During the colonial period, to better disseminate and instil the French language as a tool of spiritual subjugation, the use of indigenous languages was forbidden in the classroom and even in the school yard. Learners were instructed to use French, only French; so much so that students who were caught using local Ivorian languages red-handed were punished and ridiculed with the Symbole. The Symbole was an ugly necklace that was put on the neck of the one who was caught. He had to display it everywhere in the school yard and even in the classroom. The "culprit" had to wear the Symbole and suffer the related ridicule till another student was caught in the act of using his mother tongue. The legacy of this ban on local Ivorian languages echoes in the contemporary education. The ban on indigenous languages seems to be still hovering as it is not uncommon to see some students report their peers for using mother tongues in classroom situations. The outcome of this on the one hand, is that local Ivorian languages are overshadowed or relegated and the French language has been elevated with its poly-dimensional functions in Côte d'Ivoire. On the other hand, the educated Ivorians will adopt the French conception of traditional African culture.<sup>22</sup> This situation started since colonization and still continues, and is reinforced by the Francophonie, an international organization which regroups French speaking countries.

The language policy of Côte d'Ivoire in the wake of independence was a "default language policy", meaning that it reflected no change or simply maintained the status quo. The domination of the French language in the Ivorian landscape has not changed after the independence on August 7, 1960. The early ruling team merely copied and pasted the language policy of the colonial administration. This is manifested by the elevation of the colonial language as official language in the constitution whose first article reads that the official language of the country is French.<sup>23</sup> It was a way of establishing the primacy of French language in all public sectors in the post-independence periods. And the main reasons for this were the quest for national unity and development. It was believed that resorting to a local language among the diversity could bring forth social unrest, which they wanted to avoid. The other reason was that French language would connect Côte d'Ivoire to the rest of the world, easier access to scientific and technological knowledge which in turn would prompt development and economic prosperity. Thus, the post-independence language policy of Côte d'Ivoire was meant to guarantee stability and achieve development goals.

As can be seen, no room was granted to local languages which have to remain in the periphery. They were neither used as languages of communication in public administration nor as instruction languages in the education system of the country. Though Ivorian local languages remain strong identity markers, they enjoy no legal status and consequently are confined in the marginality of public and business sectors. It is true that they still keep some vitality especially in rural areas and in home settings in urban areas; but more and more Ivorians are using French language instead of their own ethnic languages of identification. The blame for this is shared between colonial heritage and the ruling elite, not excluding the Ivorian people in general. Apart from the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 that mandated French as the language of instruction, and made the use of local languages in schools forbidden.<sup>24</sup> Cote d'Ivoire prior to independence in 1960 entered into an agreement with France to maintain the cultural and linguistic policies of their colonizers after independence.

#### **Ghana's language policy**

The new policy in Ghana states that English should be used as the medium of instruction from primary one, with a Ghanaian language studied as a compulsory subject to the Senior Secondary School (High School). The government on 15th August, 2002 approved this policy to be implemented in September 2002. Since the announcement of the change of policy, the debate over the language of education has picked up momentum from the general populace. Ghana has been a strong advocate of the African personality since Nkrumah's era. The promulgation of the use of English as the medium of instruction in education and the abandoning of her indigenous languages in education is therefore in opposition to this ideology.<sup>24</sup> Ghana, as a former Anglophone laid a solid foundation for the use of the indigenous languages as media of instruction at the lower primary level. what necessitated the change of policy. The use of the child's primary language in education at least the early stages has been theoretically and empirically confirmed to be beneficial, but Ghana for a number of reasons has decided to espouse an English only language policy in its education. The reasons given include the following (source: The Statesman, Thursday July 16, 2002): The previous policy of using a Ghanaian language as medium of instruction in the lower primary level was abused, especially in rural schools. Teachers never spoke English in class even in primary six: Students are unable to speak and write 'good' English sentences even by the time they complete the Senior Secondary School (High School); The multilingual situation in the country especially in urban schools has made instruction in a Ghanaian language very difficult. Hence, 50 to 60 percent of children in each class in the urban area speak a different language. "It is therefore problematic if we insist that all the children be instructed in Ga, Twi, or Dagbani depending on whether it is Accra, Kumasi or Tamale". and there is a lack of materials in the Ghanaian languages to be used in teaching. The minister of Education declared that "Only five, out of the languages that are spoken by our major ethnic groups, have material developed on them. Certainly, we cannot impose these five languages on the entire nation and people of other ethnic origins" More so, a lack of Ghanaian language teachers specifically trained to teach content subjects in the Ghanaian language. He added "merely being able to speak a Ghanaian language does not mean one can teach in it". There is no standard written form of the Ghanaian languages. He says "For nearly all the languages that we have, there is hardly any standard written form". Hence, English is declared the lingua franca of the state and that all effort must be put in to ensure that children acquire the right level of competence in both the spoken and written forms of the language.<sup>25</sup>

The reasons given by the Minister of Education for the change in policy are tangible and represent the harsh realities on the ground. The most challenging of the problems raised, which seems insurmountable but can be dealt with when there is proper planning, is the multilingual nature of the nation and its classrooms drawing students from multilingual and multiethnic societies. Despite the fact that emphasis on English made it impossible for most Ghanaians to access essential information about concepts that would help them promote their social, political, and economic welfare. It was also clear from various research outcomes that such necessary information would have easily been achieved through quality education; a wrong language policy causes poor quality education. Also, it is clear that the English language was not the best language policy in the

country because it was not primarily accepted, and neither did it enhance quality education. In other words, quality education can only be offered when the language policy adopted is effective and broadly accepted.

#### **Nigeria's Language policy**

The previous Language policy that prescribed the use of mother tongue has been abrogated and cancelled by the release of the Federal government in December, 2025. The attendant problems stated were policy implementation inadequacy caused by lack of adequate teacher training and deployment in multi-lingual pedagogies, weak transition from mother tongue to English, poor performance in national and external examinations as well as inequality among states' over and under subscription of the policy.<sup>26</sup> Hence, the new language policy reaffirms the use of English language as the Medium of instruction. This was referred to as inclusive language policy, meant to promote national unity. The decision was one of the major resolutions adopted at the 69<sup>th</sup> National Council of Education (NCE), the highest national policy making body in the Education sector. The announcement was made after the meeting, held in Akure.<sup>27</sup> Persistent gaps have been identified in educational legislation in terms of teachers' preparation, curricula integration, language documentation.<sup>27</sup> When the newly-introduced policy lacked practical enforcement, it becomes mere symbolic policy. The critic of the previous system since independence, which mandated the use of the child's mother tongue or language of immediate environment are: lack of legal framework for the implementation; implementation was left to the discretion of the local authorities; no clear structure for evaluation compliance; and the emphasis on Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo marginalised other minority languages; problem of documentation of the indigenous languages; Lack of expansion of research to prepare the indigenous languages as not mere subjects but as languages of instruction in schools. Most importantly, the failure of the federal government to fund the process of upgrading the local languages.<sup>28</sup> The final reason was the perception of English as the language of social mobility and global relevance, especially in the urban centres and the problem of intergenerational transmission of the indigenous languages.

### **V. Discussion of Findings**

**Gambia** adopted Seven indigenous languages of Madinka, Puular, Wolof, Sarahule, Jola, Serer and Manjaco. After adopting English only since the post-independence era. This reflects the shift to **the Multi-lingual based Instruction** which was intended to enhance inclusion. It was done in a bid to regain the soul of the Gambian for a more resilient culture.

**Mali** demoted French and substituted it with thirteen indigenous languages of Bambara, Bobo, Bozo, Dogon, Fula, Hassaniya, Kassonke, Maninke, Minyanka, Senufo, Songhay, Soninke, and Tamasheq, all of them acquired the status of official language. English was also adopted in the stead of French, which also reflected **Multi-lingual based instruction mode**.

**Cote d'Ivoire** since the attainment of independence, adopted **French only** as the language of instruction, which succeeded in peripherization of the indigenous languages that have no legal status. However, the indigenous languages remained to be the language of identity without status.

**Ghana** based on its pan- Africanist ideology, it adopted the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction for lower classes of grade 1-3 but English language as from grade 4 but recently changed to the adoption of **English only**

**Nigeria** initially introduced the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction in lower classes but in December, 2025 announced a new language policy, adopting **English only** as the sole medium of instruction in schools.

Obviously, Ghana and Nigeria have similar experience and similar policies, though introduced not at the same time in the history of the two countries but the same reasons were given for the introduction of new policies. Gambia and Mali have the same system of Multi -lingual instruction system while Cote d'Ivoire has not experienced a change of policy. On the whole Africa is yet to speak with one voice, as far as language policy is concerned.

### **VI. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The majority of West African States attained their independence between 1958 and 1972. Both the former Francophone and the Anglophone colonies have enjoyed about 60 years of self-rule either in the military or the civilian ways. Yet, the irresponsibility of the African leaders continued to push Africans back and front. Hence, the decisive language policies that will enhance full comprehension and understanding of complex concepts for practicality, have not been adopted. Initially, some of the selected countries awakened their language policy skills, utilised the indigenous language for some years, but revert to the language of the former colonial masters after some years. Coincidentally, the same reason was given year-in year-out. Leaving out the inability of the leaders to develop the vocabularies of the indigenous languages through research funding. This paper is of the opinion that the journey is better started now. Especially that the digital literacy and revolution can enhance the process of vocabulary expansion. This will require high commitment, readiness and the good

will on the part of the leaders. The focus of such vocabulary development project will be structured to include science, technology and vocational demands. Reverting to the former colonial masters' languages as exemplified by countries like Nigeria, Ghana: Moving away from the language of one colonial master to adopt another one like Cote d' Voire, may not proffer a permanent solution to the problems of comprehension and practicality in learning and development. African leaders should be ready to take the bull by the horn over language policies. The paradigm shift experienced by the Gambia, recognising seven indigenous languages may be a way forward. This will give room for multi lingual-based education within the window period, pending the expansion of the indigenous language capacity.

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