

# Mother Tongue as Medium of Instruction: A Necessity

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**Abstract:** The mother tongue is the expression of identity of an individual as well as of individual's primary group identity. For the beginner, becoming aware of anything unknown, or to find out the meaning of everything alien, almost automatically involves connecting the concepts with the mother tongue—where control and confidence is better and get increasingly well-established, so much so that even after mastering L2 and other languages in mature years, at moments of problem and difficulty, the mind automatically takes recourse to mother tongue to resolve the problem. The non-use or non-development of the mother tongue, conversely, produce serious constrains for what can be listened, said, read or written. Alongside bilingual or multilingual education, encouraging education in the mother tongue is one of the principles set out by UNESCO. Children with a sound knowledge of their first language comfortably transfer skills from one language to another. The mother tongue opens the door, including its own grammar, to all grammars, in which it awakens the potential for universal grammar that lies within all of us. The present paper intends to make an estimate of the need and necessity of using Mother Tongue as the Medium of Instruction in the primary level.

**Keywords:** Mother Tongue, concept, language, grammar, instruction, primary.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

While there are many factors involved in delivering quality basic education, Mother Tongue is clearly the key for communication and understanding in the classroom, at least in the primary level. Many developing countries are characterized by individual as well as societal multilingualism, yet continue to allow a single foreign language to dominate the education sector. Instruction through a language that learners do not speak has been called “submersion” (Skutnabb-Kangas2000) because it is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim. Compounded by chronic difficulties such as low levels of teacher education, poorly designed, inappropriate curricula and lack of adequate school facilities, submersion makes both learning and teaching extremely difficult, particularly when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher.

### *What is Mother Tongue?*

Mother tongue is commonly seen as the language of mother. Its extended meaning is the government and the school designated language. André Martinet, the French linguist opines that mother tongue is “the language through which one comes to know the world”. In reality, mother tongue is the language to which the emotional attachment of the child or individual is strongest, the language ensuring all the cultural riches whose destruction results in the destruction of innovativeness and creativity.

The mother tongue is the expression of identity of an individual as well as of individual's primary group identity. Among the members of primary group knowledge and experience are shared through mother tongue. Mother Tongue has been defined by many scholars, referring to its multiple characteristics:

- The language learnt from the family; the language used at home;

- The first language a child speaks; the language used in the community;
- The language, a child is most competent in; the ‘preferred’ language.
- It forms people’s identity, the defining qualities of their life and culture.
- According to Bloch, “A mother tongue is the language the child can speak fluently before going to school. It is the language in which the child can operate confidently in all domains relevant to the child’s life. It may or may not be the language spoken by both parents. In this sense the bilingual child has two mother tongues”

### ***Mother Tongue: A Gateway of Further Learning:***

When Europe was first taking shape, the language of the priests and scholars was called *lingua vulgaris*, for differentiating it from Latin. At the Romans’ time the first language of a person was called *patrius sermo*, or the language of the male head of the household. Naturally the concept of Mother Tongue was neither known, nor given any importance at that time.

But with the passage of time the role of Mother Tongue in the development of identity, personality and community gets revealed. Hassanzadeh et al. (2011) explained (referring and making an addition on Butzkamm, 2003) that first language (L1/Mother Tongue), which is home language is particularly important for the development of a positive self -concept and well -being of a child. All the children, irrespective of sex, class and caste, have to move towards the school language from the home language. But children having the chance of maintaining their first language can extend their cognitive development, while learning other languages as a second language (L2). In the second language (L2) their level of competence is related to the level of competence they have achieved in their first language (L1/MT). Children having sound knowledge of their first language can comfortably transfer skills from one language to another. The mother tongue opens the door, including its own grammar, to all grammars, in which it awakens the potential for what Noam Chomsky confirmed as “Universal Grammar” that lies within all of us. It is the valuable asset people bring to the task of language learning. Because of this, the mother tongue is the master key to foreign languages, the tool which gives us the fastest, surest, most precise, and most complete means of accessing a foreign language. For the beginner, becoming aware of anything unknown, or to find out the meaning of everything alien, almost automatically involves connecting the concepts with the mother tongue – where control and confidence is better and get increasingly well-established, so much so that even after mastering L2 and other languages in mature years, at moments of problem and difficulty, the mind automatically takes recourse to mother tongue to resolve the problem.

The non - use or non-development of the mother tongue, conversely, produce serious constrains for what can be listened, said, read or written.. Mother Tongue saves learners from a feeling of frustration, which eventually leads them to avoid all topics of personal interest. The motherly support and many fold care of the mother tongue do allow pupils to tackle more difficult texts and situations. Hence, Hassanzadeh et al. (2011) extended the claim of Butzkamm (2003) that — “You can banish the mother tongue from the classroom, but you cannot banish it from the pupils’ heads”.

## **II. MOTHER TONGUE AND CULTURE**

Fakeye (2011) with reference to several studies (Amao 2010; Gladstone 1969; UNESCO 1953; Patton & Gay 1993) has explained the ingredient fibres of a close relationship between the child’s mother tongue and his culture. Amao emphasizes the significance of the language as the carrier and embodiment of the features of cultural environment. While Gladstone reiterates that language and culture are interwoven, the Report of UNESCO (1953), reveals that the culture and the personality of the individual are reflected in his language. On the basis of all such arguments, it is claimed that the use of the Mother tongue for instruction vigilantly fosters the cultural values of the child. Language, having developed in the context of a certain culture of necessity, reflects that in specific culture, language, not only organizes and integrates human interaction, but also, guides to established behaviour and motivates to conform.

Keysar et al (2012) are of the opinion that, there are good reasons to believe that the use of a foreign language would reduce people’s ability to rely on more systematic processes, because it is harder to use a foreign language, which increases cognitive load and leads to greater reliance on intuitive and affective processes. It has also been endorsed by Küper (2003) who wrote about African languages that scientific concepts are neither developed nor explained in African languages, These concepts are available only in foreign languages and then by a very small minority of the population

these are superficially and badly learned. In consequence, these scientific concepts do not penetrate in people's daily life and many of the Africans remain ignorant and marginalised.

### **III. MOTHER TONGUE AS THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION**

Küper (2003) expressed that at societal level languages have important role in cultural changes. In the industrialized societies for the sake of the introduction of new knowledge and research findings the most popular language, which is MT, is to be used. In the societies where the everyday language and the language of instruction and mass media differ the situation becomes difficult and complicated.

It is language, primarily through which children interact with the environment into which they have been born (Pattanayak 2003). Language bourn knowledge skills and myths are transmitted through mother tongue from one generation to another. Having been most familiar and comfortably usable for all members of a society/community, the Mother Tongue becomes the standardized version of its spoken language, to be used as the popular medium of everyday interaction, communication, education and administration. Naturally children who come from a linguistic or ethnic minority in an indigenous group, enter school with poorer prospects of success and emerge within fewer years of education with lower levels of achievement (Gacheche 2010). In the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report 2010, "Education For All" it has been advised that to effectively teach around 221 million children worldwide speaking a different language at home, from the one used as medium of instruction in schools, there is a need to teach them first in their home language (L1) while gradually introducing the national or official language (L2) (Khan 2014).

In normal situation, however, young children learn at home language/mother tongues and arrive at early learning programs such as preschool and primary school with this precious resource, unaware of and unexposed the other dominant languages used in their broader social world. Moreover, it has been Sathiaseelan (2013) rightly asserted that the children think and dream in the mother tongue. So training in communication through mother tongue is the first instrument of human culture and the first essential of schooling. As it is of great importance for children to have a firm foundation in their mother tongue, schools should essentially have it as the basic medium of instruction. Children learn the most in their own mother tongue, which is the easiest way of learning. Schooling period in the life of children is the most important phase because it is during this period that their inner possibilities begin to take a firm shape and form, it is in this period that aptitude and attitude get developed. Therefore, during that time, especially in the primary level (up to 10 years of age) the emotional as well as physical needs of the children need greatest care. Mother tongue becomes the ideal medium of instruction for them, because it is as natural to them as the milk of mother, and in their own native tongue they can best explore their own natural environment, spending and gathering experiences, minute by minute. If this foundation and formation years get the shade and shelter of mother tongue, they gain valuable confidence that continues to offer yields even in mature years during acquisition of other foreign languages. Therefore, on pedagogical ground itself, it has been generally asserted that in Primary Education the mother tongue is best suited as the language of concept formation, and naturally it should be selected as the medium of instruction.

The theory is also supported by practice as Phiri (2013) refers to an experiment of a reading literacy test done in 32 countries, where students having home language in school instruction, made an easier transition into reading than those who had to learn/adopt a new language in order to read in school. Thus, the indispensability and primacy of mother tongue in early childhood education is now well established and it has inspired a number of conventions, declarations, resolutions, national and international legislations, aiming at promotion of education in mother tongue as the best practical step to protect and uphold the linguistic competence and one of the major birth rights of children.

### **IV. EDUCATION IN MOTHER TONGUE: A RIGHT OF CHILDREN**

Alongside bilingual or multilingual education, encouraging education in the mother tongue is one of the principles set out by UNESCO. According to Ball (2010) UNESCO since 1953 is supporting right of children to learn their mother tongue, and is advocating the maintenance of cultural and linguistic, diversity through language-in-education policies. Magga et al (n.d.) quoted that article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) stated that the child's education should be directed to : " the development of the child's talents, personality, and physical and mental abilities to their fullest potential" and "the child's preparation for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of peace, understanding, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, national ethnic, and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin". These objectives have been best fulfilled where children are taught through mother Tongue, at least in the

primary level. According to Vulli (2014) the right to education in a language that the children understand is not only a basic human right but also a necessary ingredient of equality in education". Mother tongue provides emotional and social identity to individuals, expressing their essence of cultures, and giving them a sense of rooted-ness. Schooling in the children's mother tongue reflects respect for them and their cultural appreciation, hence mother tongue exclusion from the schools is looked as 'harmful to children's self esteem', as children thereby are "reduced to minorities in their own homes". It is imposing limits on freedom curbing creativity and innovativeness, depriving society and individual of free choices, and restricting participation or potential participation in multiple spheres of human interaction.

#### ***Advantages of Education through Mother Tongue:***

According to Gacheche (2010) researches have shown that mother tongue-based schooling significantly improves learning. The use of a familiar language to teach children literacy is more effective than a submersion system as learners "can employ psycholinguistic guessing strategies" to learn how to read and write. This means that since children can already speak the language, they can learn to associate sounds with the symbols they see, thus facilitating understanding. When literacy skills, such as reading, are taught in a foreign language, the children first have to gain familiarity with the sound before they can master the symbol. Such cognitive development takes time, which is a luxury submersion. This forces learners and teachers to resort to rote teaching and learning, where the children merely memorize what the teacher says without necessarily understanding the meaning.

According to Coleman and Capstick (2012) it takes children about two years to acquire social English but seven years to acquire 'educational English'. In the low exposure contexts the process will take much longer. With this in mind, it is obvious that attempts to teach science and mathematics through English to children who are not literate in their first language are futile and mere waste of time and possibilities.

Kadel (2010) asserts that instruction in mother tongue is highly important at the beginning of education, for development of a strong educational foundation, as well as to strengthen the learners' cognitive development. There is a big gap between the school and the home for children, unless the mother tongue is used in education. Studies of Ball (2010) has shown that children learn best in their mother tongue as a foundation for and bilingual and multilingual education. Children's ability to learn a second or additional language does not suffer when their mother tongue is the primary language of instruction throughout primary school. Research has confirmed that six to eight years of education in a language are necessary to develop the level of literacy and verbal proficiency required for academic achievement in secondary school. Fluency and literacy in the mother tongue lay a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning additional languages.

Fakeye (2011) in the advocacy for the importance of Mother Tongue as medium of instruction for children, therefore, rightly refers to the Report on African languages and English in Education, where it has been said that:

***It is quicker and more efficient for the illiterate, first to acquire literacy in the mother tongue and then to proceed to English... literacy in the mother tongue should normally be a condition of being taught English.***

Children with a sound knowledge of their first language comfortably transfer skills from one language to another. The mother tongue opens the door, including its own grammar, to all grammars, in which it awakens the potential for universal grammar that lies within all of us. It is the valuable asset people bring to the task of language learning. For this reason, the mother tongue is regarded as the master key to the learning of all foreign languages, in subsequent years.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

When medium of instruction is a tool and a vehicle of growth in skills, knowledge, interests, abilities, and attitudes – albeit a tool of learning, the suitability of medium of instruction is to be decided on the consideration of its effectiveness as a learning tool rather than on the basis of political, cultural, or economic consideration. It is an established fact that learning through the students' mother tongue has maximum effectiveness. Experiments have proved that a lack of education in a first language was a reason for children dropping out, while children having access to instruction in their mother tongue were more likely to be enrolled and attending school. Thus it can be said in conclusion that mother tongue is the best first entry language into education, it is the key to success for future learning, it is the best instrument of maintaining the individual groups' culture, and it is also the convincing surety for effective participation in national development and reconstruction.

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