**OUR MOTHER-TONGUE IS ROOTED IN LOVE**

**PAPER PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY**

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**By**

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**All Protocol Observed Ladies and Gentlemen.**

**I thank God for giving me this opportunity to be with you here in Nigeria, for the Celebration of 2014 International Mother Language Day.**

We have all gathered here today to show our solidarity and express our love for our mother-tongue. I thank all of you who are here and may God bless you.

International Mother Language Day was proclaimed by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation ([UNESCO](http://www.unesco.org/)) in 1999, as a result of the death of two students during their demonstration in 1952,in Dhaka, for the recognition of their language, Bangladeshi, as one of the two national languages of the then Pakistan.

International Mother Language Day is designed to celebrate and promote linguistic diversity and multicultural education, in order to raise awareness of the importance of mother tongue education. UNESCO noted that languages are the most powerful instruments for the preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage, thus International Mother Language Day has been celebrated since February 2000.

2014 marks the 15th International mother Language day, and the theme for this year is “Local Languages for Global Citizenship: Spotlight on Science”.

A recent report of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stated that the endangered languages in Nigeria are about 152.

UNESCO has advocated for mother-tongue instruction in a bilingual or multilingual education approach in the early years, because of its importance in creating a strong foundation for learning: the use of mother tongue with young children at home or in pre-school prepares them for smooth acquisition of literacy in their mother–tongue and eventually the acquisition of second (perhaps national) language at a later stage in their schooling.

One of the things which identify a race or a tribe is that they have a location or a place on the world map they can call home, to which they can trace their origin, and, most importantly, that they have a language.

Mother-tongue is a parent language, one’s native language, or the language the mother passes on to the child, we can also explain “mother-tongue” as a person’s language that is acquired in infancy. In this paper, it means the native language of the parents, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, etc.

Mother-tongue is language, which is more than speech; it includes culture, and its derived values and behaviours which, in early childhood are developed in the home and are socially defined (Fishman, 1989).

Culture is a “system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting”, It is seen as the force motivating and directing people to engage into actions that are deemed by them to enhance socially shared values (both collective and individual (Trueba et al., 1981:3).

Thus, Language cannot be separated from culture; it is a vehicle of identity, socialisation, solidarity and cohesion. A solid foundation in the home language increases the child’s self esteem and confidence in their own ethnicity. This is the child’s connection with his/her family, country, extended family members, culture and self identity. Cummins 2000

In the words of one of the greatest sons of Africa, Nelson Mandela **“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, it goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart**.” It is in the heart that we have emotions that guide our relationship with one another, whether in the home or in the larger community, Nigeria.

This paper sets out to examine the result of recent studies and research findings on the importance of mother-tongue, in the educational development of children, and recommends how the mother- tongue can be utilised to develop the thinking, cognitive and emotional growth of Nigerian children and young people, all of which will then help them learn foreign languages for global citizenship.

**Colonial Days**

During the Colonial days, when we were under British rule, there was need to have a national language for the purpose of communication, hence English language was used.

Students were previously punished for speaking their mother tongue in schools in many countries, such as Nigeria, under the colonial rule.At that time a strong message was communicated to them that for acceptance by the teacher and the society they had to renounce their home language, mother tongue and culture. According to the UN Declaration of Human Rights,Cummins (2000 ) stated that stopping children now from using their mother-tongue, which is key to their identity, is“children genocide“.

However, most western countries such as Britain and the United States of America, have encouraged students to speak their mother-tongue in schools,as a result of research findings on the importance of children’s mother tongue for their overall personal and educational development..

**Results of Research Studies**

UNESCO has now recognised the importance of mother-tongue and the need to encourage the teaching of the mother-tongue, as a result of the educational benefits,including cognitive advantages,enhanced communication skills and openness to different cultural perspectives.It is petinent for us in Nigeria to look at the results of these studies to see how we can best utilise our community languages as ’national assets’ which can improve ’intercultural understanding’ for social cohesion.( Lord Dearing(2006)

Studies have shown that children who are bilingual or multilingual (ability to speak two or more languages) have more advantages than children who can only speak English. These advantages include an increased psychological well-being, a higher self-esteem, greater levels of tolerance and appreciation of other cultures, and enhanced literacy skill in their mother tongue which helps develop high-order thinking skills. Children who speak their mother-tongue and English are said to be bilingual. Bilingualism promises a respect for diversity and an ability to navigate different cultural realities. (Cummins, Baker, Ellen Bialystock and others).

Angela Creese’s research at the University of Birmingham, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (2009), discovered that students develop their verbal and written skills across a variety of languages. The findings further stated that the use of mother- tongue at home can benefit the development of the children’s English as they transfer their increased knowledge about language, and helps encourage their self-esteem. The study also suggested that ‘children may develop more flexibility in their thinking because they are able to process information through different languages’.

Ellen Bialystock’s (2005) research in bilingualism has also shown that bilingual people are better at multitasking, which helps to dramatically lessen age-related mental decline and has also an advantage in learning to read.

Both Ofsted, the Agency responsible for maintaining Standards in Education in United Kingdom, and The Department of Education in Britain ( DfES ) recognise the importance of bilingual learning by stating: ‘Bilingualism is an asset and the first language has a significant and continuing role in identity, learning and the acquisition of additional languages’. This helps in building pupils’ self confidence, intercultural awareness and social responsibility and their language skills. (Charmian Kenner’s ‘Report: “Community Languages”, Goldsmiths College).

The development of mother-tongue education is an essential aid in laying a solid foundation for the development of stronger literacy abilities in the school language, and for the child to become bilingual and later multilingual. This helps the child’s development in creativity and sensitivity to communication. The child is provided with opportunities for his/her vocational life in the future. It has been recognised that bilinguals bring linguistic and cultural “capital” with them to the job market. In the international business sector, they have an edge in the domestic market (in Nigeria) where they can serve in tourism, social services and language interpretation, thus bringing significant benefits to the individual and the society (Cummins 2000).

**Our Mother-Tongue is our Root**

Coming back to what one of our African heroes said, talking to someone in his mother–tongue goes to his heart. When you, a Nigerian, speaks the English Language to your child at home,that goes to his head,not his heart. Something else takes over in his heart,because you the parents have created a vacum in your child’s heart. There is no love being developed in the child’s heart,it is in the heart that emotions are formed and developed. In some cases, hatred develops, if the child does not find love among his peers, and the child will have low self-esteem and lack of confidence,will also be faced with identity crises. Since outside the home the main language is the language of the society, English, that love is lacking. When love is not expressed to the child by speaking the mother-tongue at home, the child grows to have low self esteem, has a tougher time and tends to be withdrawn, as the lack of transmission of cultural values by the parents at home leads to aggressive and anti-social behavior in the community; such children can be easily lured into gang activities and crime.

Speaking our mother-tongue with our children at home, helps to form the foundation of love for one another and for their country. As the child continues to grow and speaks the mother-tongue, that love grows. Mother-tongue is seen as the root of a tree, the family, and as the root receives nourishment, the tree continues to grow, becomes healthy, blossoms, and bears healthy fruit. People will then pluck the fruit and eat, i.e. the child will be able to share his love with others; that is the fruit.This will help encourage his/her self-esteem, and build more confidence, which are ‘- essential characteristics of a successful learner.’ Therefore, the more confident the child, the more likely is the overall motivation for learning across the school curriculum( Creese Angela ,2009).

Our mother–tongue is our root; the type and nature of the root matters so much. The foundation of the root and whether it receives good nourishment will help determine what the tree will turn out to be. Is our family built on speaking English language, whether Pidgin English or Queens English or the language of the parents, the mother tongue? That will determine whether you are building a strong family, a tree which can stand at any time - no matter the type of storms of life blowing on the members of the family; that type of tree –family is built on love.

Remember that it is called the mother-tongue, because of the importance of the mothers in inculcating the language to the children. Mothers are the first teachers to the children at home; as the mother breast feeds or nurtures the baby, she expresses love, and when the child makes his/her first speech the mother is there. Therefore, it is important that as the mother is dealing with the child in infancy, one of the means of expressing her love is by speaking her mother-tongue to the child. “Women’s influence is eternal, it shapes a family, community, society and nation’’. The father is the head of the family, the master of his own household and should speak in the language of his own people. Who are his own people? - the tribe to which he belongs!

Can a tree survive without its root? Nigeria cannot stand without its roots, the mother-tongue. According to Nelson Mandela, when you speak to the person in his language, which is his mother-tongue, you are speaking to his heart. Why should languages in Nigeria be among the endangered languages of the world? It is well known that the languages of the Nations who are aware of the value of mother-tongue, such as India, Portuguese, and Bangladesh, are not among the endangered languages of the world.

Don’t let the enemy deny us the benefit of a strong family based on love, which is key to unity in homes and communities, and forms the basis/foundation of a strong nation. We have thrown away our root, which is our mother-tongue; the basis of a strong family is love rooted in our mother-tongue. This is one of the major reasons of crime, looting, cheating, and arrogance, lack of love for one another and for one’s country. The elites, who were brought up in their mother-tongue in their families, stopped speaking their mother-tongue because they thought they “have arrived”. How can your children learn the culture and heritage of your tribe and pass the same to the next generation without you speaking the language of your people to them?

The theme for 20014 IMLD is **Local Languages for Global Citizenship: Spotlight on Science**.

Education for global citizenship aims at learners being multilingual, able to use at least three languages in Education: the mother-tongue, the national language, in the case of Nigeria English language, and an international language. This shows that bilingualism and multilingualism have been recommended for achieving Education for global citizenship. In addition, studies have shown that the development of the mother-tongue is an essential aid in laying a solid foundation for the development of stronger literacy abilities in the school language, for the children to become bilinguals and even multilingual, and that it has social, emotional and cognitive advantages. The aim is to promote linguistic diversity in multicultural Nigeria and encourage the use of our mother-tongue, both inside and outside the classrooms, to preserve our culture and heritage.

In the case of mixed marriages, children learn their parents’ culture and language even when the parents speak different mother-tongues. Dr Charmian Kenner’s report showed that young children, aged five, are very capable of learning different writing systems and are at the age they can find out how language works. The study demonstrated that it is not difficult for children to be bilingual (ability to speak two languages); they can move more comfortably than adults “from one language script to the other and they can use their knowledge creatively.” The report also indicated that bilingualism offers children “cognitive gains”. Therefore, the argument that speaking your mother-tongue and the language of the larger community, English, will confuse a child does not hold, considering the results of research studies over the years. The child is able to build relationships in the extended family and is able to feel a sense of belonging and ‘rootedness’. If the parents live in an urban city, at any time the child visits the village, the child would not be excluded or frustrated in communication among the child’s community; he/she is able to bridge between cultures. But if the child speaks only English, there tends to be a barrier to building relationships with the extended family, and the child feels excluded and frustrated, with the loss of self-esteem and its destructive emotional upheavals.

Local languages for global citizenship are to promote mother-tongue which, if properly learnt, will enhance the learning of the national and international languages. Learners are able to accommodate cultural diversity and play an active role both at local and global levels. They are able to address global challenges, and contribute in creating a just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world. In terms of local languages and science, much remains to be achieved in the promotion of traditional and indigenous knowledge and its contribution to science with related issues to global citizenship.

**SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO SAFEGUARD OUR MOTHER-TONGUE (REDUCE ENDANGERMENT IN NIGERIA).**

* Families will benefit if they use the mother-tongue consistently as a means of communication at home in a wider variety of ways as often as possible so that the culture associated with the tribe is reflected in everyday life: at meals, games, plays, songs, storytelling, folklores, nursery rhymes, walking back the child from school or in the farm, and helping them understand the characters and plots in the stories being told. These are important ways of interacting with the child, and bringing the language and cultural values to the home. It is important to develop speaking the mother-tongue with the child before the child starts school. The parents and all the siblings should use the mother-tongue to interact with the child and never speak any other language. When the child is consistently communicated to in the mother-tongue, he/she learns to speak it because that is the language people around him/her speak to get his/her needs met.

NALDIC (2009) research on Bilingualism confirmed that improved literacy in children’s mother-tongue will have a direct benefit for future progress in English: ‘the level of development of children’s first language is a strong predictor of their second language development’, and ‘promoting languages other than majority language at school helps develop not only these languages, but also children’s abilities in the majority language’.

It has also been recognised that language and thought necessarily work hand in hand, so it is not possible to have one functioning effectively independent of the other (Mushi, 2002).

* Local and national media can produce articles in the indigenous languages of the immediate community.
* To celebrate the IMLD in Nigeria, teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools should allow each ethnic group to prepare songs, poetry, dancing, a short drama or teach other pupils a little of their language, especially schools in cities where we have pupils from different ethnic groups.
* Cultural activities, such as films and music could be organised to celebrate Nigeria’s different languages.
* At the State level, the Ministries of Education should promote bilingual education and instruction in both the local language and English language in the schools, in addition to learning other foreign languages. The children should mature in age at primary school by staying in primary school up to primary six, because as they mature in their mother-tongue they mature in their culture before moving into a higher institution to avoid peer pressure and gang activities.

**CONCLUSION.**

Arise all Nigerians, come and let us rebuild our Nation with the instrument of love, which is our mother-tongue, so that we will not be a reproach to Africa. God has blessed us, Nigeria: look at our clothes, very colourful; there are no hurricanes, no snows, no earthquakes nor some of the other natural disasters of the world; there is a lot of sunshine, and we are endowed with a lot of human and material resources.

Why are we copying the West in their languages? We should be proud of our languages, our mother tongues rooted in love, and use them to form a solid foundation to the learning of other languages which, are called ‘’Foreign languages’’ because they are foreign to our root and identity.

**Please repeat after me:**

**My mother-tongue is rooted in love, When I speak my language to my children, I am expressing love, without love my family cannot stand; without love my nation, Nigeria cannot stand.**

Thank You for listening. Long Live Nigeria! Long Live our indigenous languages!!

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