

# **Mother Tongue as a Medium of Instruction in Education: Thoughts based on Effectiveness**

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## **Introduction – Language and its importance**

The human society today has advanced in all spheres of life and is now at the peak of civilization. Language is one of the most noteworthy means by which the society came to the advanced status as it is today. Language plays an important role in developing man's numerous ideas, thoughts and culture. Furthermore a language manifests the history of the people who speak that language, their age old literature, their heritage and culture. A language acts as a source medium and expression of one's culture and helps to distinguish him and his linguistic group from the others. In addition, it acts as a powerful tool in integrating all those who speak the same language and a strong basis for incorporating all their activities. Moreover, language acts as a means of communication and performs functions beyond it.

Thoughts and their expression through language cannot be separated from one another. Because of this, there is very close relationship between education and language. All educational functions are performed through language. The language plays an important role in education. Language is the medium of education and occupies an important part in curriculum. It is an essential medium to make education wide and deep. Therefore, the extension of knowledge depends on the advancement of a language. It is the language which acts as a tool to spread education. So, language ought to be natural and familiar to those who receive education. Knowledge thus gained can only be lasting.

## **Types of language**

When a language becomes a medium of instruction and a subject of study, it can be differentiated as mother tongue and a foreign language. The term 'mother tongue'

is used to indicate the home language of the child, i.e. the language spoken by the child in his home surroundings. It is learnt as a means of self-expression and understanding, while foreign languages are studied as means of international communication, acquisition of additional knowledge and for their cultural values.

### **Meaning of Mother Tongue**

What do we mean by 'Mother Tongue'? Traditionally, the language first learnt has been called the mother tongue. All other languages are called second, third languages or foreign languages. Some scholars, have accepted 'a language learnt without formal training' as the mother tongue.<sup>1</sup> In the 1881 census of India, mother tongue was defined as 'the language spoken by the individual from the cradle.'<sup>2</sup> In the 1891 census, the term was changed into 'parents tongue' which was defined to mean the language spoken by the parents of the individuals.<sup>3</sup> According to the instruction given in the 1961 census, mother tongue is 'the language spoken in the childhood by person's mother; if the mother died in infancy, 'the language mostly spoken in the person's home in childhood; in the case of infants and deaf/mutes, 'the language spoken by the mother'.<sup>4</sup>

In respect of European countries, ideas about mother tongue appeared as follows. In the 1923 census it was meant to be 'thinking language'.<sup>5</sup> In 1934 it was defined 'the language of the cultural circle',<sup>6</sup> In the 1961 instruction 'the language of their homes'. Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines mother tongue as 'the language of one's mother, the language naturally acquired in infancy and childhood; one's first language'<sup>8</sup>

Though many views have been put forward about the mother tongue, in brief it can be explained as follows: Mother tongue is such a language with which one is emotionally identified. It is the language through which the child recognizes and organizes his experience and environment around him. It is the language used to express one's basic needs, ideas, thoughts, joys, sorrows, and other feelings.

### **Importance of Mother tongue as the medium of instruction in Education**

All the educationists and philosophers agree that there are no two opinions about the fact that a child learns the most and in the easiest way in his own mother tongue.

Most of the educators agree that the first twelve years in a child's life are the most important. During this period, child's attitude and aptitude are developed. Hence, during that time the physical as well as emotional needs of the child require intelligent care. The mother tongue becomes the ideal medium during this period, because it is as natural to him as the mother's milk, and children are able to explore their own natural environment better in their own native tongue.<sup>9</sup> In addition, if the foundation for the future development of the child is laid in his own mother tongue, the child will be able to build up on it in later years even in another language<sup>10</sup>. It is also generally accepted, on pedagogical grounds that the mother tongue is best suited as the medium of instruction. It is the natural language of thought for the child and highly suited for concept formation, while any language may be the language of added comprehension. Only the language with which one lives and grows is best suited to achieving originality in thought and expression.<sup>11</sup>

A meeting of United Nation's experts has shown that the mother tongue is the best medium for teaching a child. The emphasis on mother tongue education is not merely for educational growth and achievements, but also for national reconstruction and development. This is evident from the latest report on mother tongue education by Unesco which considered mother tongue as 'the key to and success in education, as the best first entry into education, the best instrument of maintaining the culture of individual groups, and the participation in national reconstruction and development. It is also a powerful instrument in the fight against, illiteracy and ignorance, discrimination and poverty'.<sup>12</sup>

Learning the mother tongue and learning through the mother tongue as the process of learning to mean learning a multi functional and multi literal semantic system. It means developing the ability to play a variety of roles in the socio-cultural complex. The lesson in the mother tongue is not merely one occasion for inculcation of knowledge; it is part of the child's intimation into the life of man. Training in the use of the mother tongue – the tongue in which a child thinks and dreams, become the first essential of schooling and the first instrument of human culture.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore of the greatest importance for our pupils to get a firm foundation in their mother tongue; at the same time we are giving them a firm footing in their intellectual life. All the virtues that are necessary for a good citizen, clear, thinking, clear expression.

sincerity of thoughts, feelings and action fullness of emotional and creative life can be properly cultivated and developed only if sufficient attention is paid to the foundation of emotional and intellectual life, by the mother tongue. If children learn through their mother tongue, it is easy. But when they learn in a foreign language, it takes more time and therefore, lesser time is left for their play and other activities. This naturally hampers the personality of the children. Therefore, teaching through the mother tongue is important because the growth of our people depends on it.

### **Mother tongue as a Medium of Instruction in Education – Various Views**

Here some of the views for the importance of mother tongue as the medium of education are given.

#### **Aye – Bamg bose (Educationist)**

In the world of education the world wide opinion that exists today is that every child should have the right to receive his education in his mother tongue. This right should not be usurped from the African children. It is through the mother tongue that a child learns the cultural heritage of his parents. Therefore denying the right of learning in his mother tongue to a child is like cutting off the creative ability and skill of a child.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Baba Fa funwa (Educationist)**

The mother tongue becomes the 'ideal' medium because it is natural to the child as the mother's milk. Children are able to explore their own natural environment better in their own native language. If the foundation for the future development of the child is laid in his own mother tongue, the child will be able to buildup on it in later years even in another language.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Bhatanyar (Educationist)**

One single cause of our dismal educational failure is our refusal to let these millions of students use their own language for their education. We originally overlook the whole psychological harm we are doing to our disadvantaged millions by imposing on them both a language and a language style not their own and thereby violating

personal and psychic identity. I am making a passionate plea for imparting education in primary, secondary and tertiary levels through the mother tongue.<sup>16</sup>

**Desai, A.R. (Sociologist)**

It is generally accepted on sound pedagogical grounds, that the mother tongue is best suited as the medium of instruction. It is the natural language of thought for the child and eminently suited for concept formation. While any language may be the language of added comprehension, only the language with which one lives and grows is best suited to achieving originality in thought and expression. If a language has not been exploited for expressing certain abstruse concepts, it is due to no inherent defect in that language. Language can only be enriched through use, and so the argument, that a language cannot be used because it is not rich is like putting the cart before the horse.<sup>17</sup>

**Gajendragadhar, P.B. (Justice)**

I wish to reiterate that the universities would be adopting the mother tongue/ regional medium upto the first degree course mainly on the ground that such adoption would help to improve the quality of education and would receive better response from students. This course is adopted not with a view to make education easier or cheaper in quality, but on the contrary, to make it better in every way.<sup>18</sup>

**Mahatma Gandhi (Father of India)**

I must cling to my mother tongue as, to my mother's breast in spite of its shortcomings. It alone can give me the life – giving milk. I am certain that the children of the nation that receive instruction in a mother tongue, other than their own commit suicide. It robs them of all originality. It stunts their growth and isolate them from their home. I regard such a thing as a national tragedy of the first importance.<sup>19</sup>

**Nichales Hans (Educationist)**

The children who are educated through a foreign language run the risk of having split minds. The outcome is the splitting of their minds into two water – tight compartments, one for ordinary things and actions – expressed in their mother tongue, and another for things connected with school subjects and the world of ideas expressed

in a foreign language. As a result the student is unable to speak his home affairs in the school language and about learned subjects in their mother tongue. So a child's mother tongue is the natural medium of his entire education.<sup>20</sup>

**Pattanajak,D.K. (Linguist)**

Instruction in the mother tongue helps in the search of self affirmation, establishes groups identity, satisfies the national urge for cultural rootedness and avoids fanaticism. It brings the child into a harmonious relationship with his environment and maximizes the opportunities offered by the early learning experience. It permits the adult learner to see issues in the perspective of the common man.<sup>21</sup>

**Rajaji – (Educationist, Former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu)**

It has been my hope and ambition for long that the mother tongue should be the language of instruction. Still, I am of this opinion not only in the primary and high schools but also in the universities that the medium of instruction should be mother tongue.<sup>22</sup>

**Ramanathan Pon – (National leader of Sri Lanka)**

I will not permit my children to speak English at home. I will say that my mother is superior to the ruler. My mother is Tamil. So the policy of the government should be to spend more on swabasha (mother tongue) education. This will be stable and beneficial to the country.<sup>23</sup>

**Unesco Conference Report of 1981**

We have seen the fact that over one half of the world's population is illiterate and the large proportion of the children of school – age are not in schools or are learning through a tongue which is not their own. We have the proposition that education is best carried on thorough the mother tongue of the people and if a child is taught in a foreign medium, he is at a disadvantage.<sup>24</sup>

**Vipulananda Swami (Philosopher and educationist of Sri Lanka)**

When we analyse the method of teaching higher education, we feel that it is like making them carry the whole mountain for a pinch of medicine. A student who tries

to get a Diploma in educational attainments, though very versatile in his field of study, if he does not have the skill of expressions in English, he is denied the chance to getting it. As a result, he loses his interest in education and suffers due to that. Because of reasons like these, it is indisputable that higher education too should be in the mother tongue.<sup>25</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The above ideas reveal that the necessity for instruction in the mother tongue is being realized today. Most of the educationists, linguists, sociologists and psychologists were inspired and convinced by the mother tongue principle. The educational researches emphasize the significance of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in education.

It is accepted by every one that language is the vehicle through which man conveys his thoughts and ideas to others. But it does not mean that language is not needed unless and until we express our thoughts to others. Language is always integrated with thoughts. Majority of the people think in their mother tongue. When it is expressed in a language other than their own, many difficulties occur. Many find it difficult to express their thoughts in a foreign language perfectly and satisfactorily.

In this regard, the language a student learns from his childhood is the appropriate language to express his thoughts and feelings. Learning experiences such as listening, hearing, comprehending, and expressing effectively, quickly, fully, and critically are possible only through such a language.

It is true that proficiency in a foreign language is necessary, but it does not mean that proficiency in a second language alone will lead to acquirement of knowledge. The proficiency in a foreign language is necessary to enhance the skill of learning acquired through instruction in mother tongue, but it is not to be hailed as a medium of instruction.

Such views have led to the conclusion that a child's mother tongue is the natural medium of his entire education and all studies should centre around the mother tongue. If we ignore this principle of education we cannot achieve real and stable progress in education which, in turn, will not pave the way for human resource development.

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