

TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE GAP AS A BLINDSPOT IN THE MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

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Abstract

Mother tongue education plays a crucial role in promoting inclusive and effective learning environments, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering academic achievement. However, in Nigeria, the effective integration of the mother tongue into education faces numerous challenges, including the knowledge gap among teachers. This study examines the theoretical framework of language acquisition theories, including behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism, and their implications for mother tongue education. It explores the definition and importance of the mother tongue from linguistic, cultural, and psychological perspectives, highlighting its significance in cultural transmission and learning. The study identifies challenges in implementing mother tongue education in Nigeria, such as the lack of resources, language policy issues, and teacher training deficiencies. Furthermore, it discusses the impact of these challenges on teaching practices and student outcomes, emphasising the need for targeted interventions and supportive policies. Recommendations are provided to address the knowledge gap among teachers and promote effective mother tongue education, including investing in teacher training, developing teaching materials, promoting language policy reforms, and leveraging technology. By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can foster linguistic diversity, preserve cultural heritage, and build an equitable and inclusive educational system that empowers all learners to succeed.

Keywords: Teachers, Knowledge Gap, Blindspot, Mother Tongue & Education

Introduction

The purpose of education is to help children reach their full potential so that they can contribute to the development of both their local community and the country as a whole. This claim is predicated on the idea that education allows for the pursuit of knowledge, which is the ultimate truth. This is thought to be one of the most practical strategies to actualise a nation's growth and development. This supports the idea that no culture or nation can excel above the standard of its education. Therefore, it is always the duty of education stakeholders to plan appropriately for the accomplishment

of educational objectives and to motivate students to acquire the critical thinking abilities required to succeed in the twenty-first century.

In the meantime, knowledge must be transferred in education, and language is a key tool for this process. According to Osisanwo (2008), language is human noise that members of a speech community use regularly and methodically to communicate. An indigenous language, often known as the mother tongue, is the language spoken by a group of people or country. It is the first language that a newborn spontaneously uses and is typically acquired without instruction. It also

typically satisfies all of the child's language demands. According to Fakeye (2011), language and education are inextricably linked and the success that students attain in a teaching and learning environment is greatly influenced by the language that is used as the medium of instruction. He also acknowledges that students must summon the willpower to acquire new language skills in addition to their native tongue since they bring their entire knowledge with them to class. According to Fakeye & Soyinka (2009), nations that employ their native tongues as a teaching medium like Finland, South Korea, and Japan have the best educational rankings. Evidence from Cameroon, India, Mali, the Philippines, South Africa, and Vietnam, according to Ball (2011), attests to the advantages of learning a second language. When taught in their native tongue, children pick up reading skills more quickly because they already possess a vast vocabulary, an understanding of linguistic structure, and the ability to pronounce the language sounds.

According to Fafunwa (1974), education is the dissemination of knowledge for the purpose of ensuring either national development or social control, or both, and the transmission of culture in terms of continuity and growth. Education is a potent tool for knowledge acquisition, culture formation, skills development, and intellectual growth. It is also the art of passing along knowledge from an instructor to a student. Since being allowed to explore one's surroundings is a form of education, the degree of an individual's education is determined by the opportunities provided to them to do so (Sulaiman, 2005).

The language that a group of people who regard themselves to be inhabitants of a place learn in their early years and that eventually becomes

their natural means of thought and communication is known as their mother tongue (Awoniyi, 1974). A person learns their mother tongue as their first language; all other languages are acquired outside of the formal educational system, for example, through cultural immersion before puberty (Wikipedia, 2004). The majority of the things, behaviours, concepts, qualities, and other things that are significant to the kid and society are named in the mother tongue, which classifies a significant portion of the child's surroundings. According to David (2008), a child's mother tongue serves as both the natural foundation for the development of verbal skills and the language of their surroundings.

The importance of mother tongue education extends beyond academic advancement to include national development and restoration. Mother tongue languages in a multilingual approach are essential components of quality education, which is itself the foundation for empowering women and men and their societies (UNESCO, 2016). This is clear from the UNESCO report on mother tongue education, which regarded mother tongue instruction as essential to academic achievement, the ideal means of initiation into the classroom, the best means of preserving local cultures, and the means of engaging in the rebuilding and development of a country. It is also an effective tool in the struggle against poverty, discrimination, and ignorance and illiteracy. This is the only and greatest way to provide education to everyone in the most organic way possible. The first requirement of education and the first tool of human civilization is learning to communicate in one's mother tongue, which is also the language in which a kid thinks and dreams. Because we are also providing our students with a solid

intellectual basis, it is imperative that our students receive a solid foundation in their mother language. Only by giving adequate attention to the foundation of the emotional and intellectual life with the use of the mother tongue can all the virtues required for a good citizen, such as clear thinking, clear expression, sincerity of thoughts, feelings, and action full of emotional and creative life, be properly cultivated and developed.

Mother tongue instruction is extremely important, especially in culturally varied countries like Nigeria. The mother language is essential to identity, culture, and cognitive development in addition to being a tool for communication (Bamgbose, 2000). The mother tongue has a particularly important role in education for creating inclusive learning environments and conserving cultural legacy in Nigeria, a country where over 500 languages are spoken (Ogunsiji, 2017). But even with its accepted significance, there is a persistent problem: teachers' lack of understanding of how to effectively use mother language in teaching methods.

Teachers play a fundamental role in shaping the educational experiences of students, acting as facilitators of learning and agents of change within the classroom. Their understanding and proficiency in utilising the mother tongue as a medium of instruction are pivotal factors that can significantly impact students' comprehension, engagement, and overall academic achievement. Teachers are central figures in shaping the educational experiences of students. Their understanding and proficiency in utilising the mother tongue as a medium of instruction significantly influence students' comprehension, engagement, and overall academic achievement (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Yet, many teachers in Nigeria face a knowledge

gap when it comes to incorporating the mother tongue effectively into their teaching methodologies. This knowledge deficit which stems from various factors, including limited training opportunities, inadequate resources, and institutional barriers poses a considerable obstacle to harnessing the full potential of mother tongue-based education initiatives.

Teachers' understanding and proficiency in utilising the mother tongue as a medium of instruction are essential for promoting comprehension, engagement, and overall academic achievement among students. The knowledge gap among teachers indicates a widespread lack of proficiency among teachers in utilising mother tongue effectively. Many teachers struggle to speak, write, and use the language proficiently, thereby hindering their ability to deliver quality instruction. This knowledge gap represents a blind spot in mother tongue education and undermines its potential as a tool for inclusive and effective learning.

Hence, the researcher delves into the multifaceted significance of the mother tongue in Nigerian education and examines the challenges stemming from teachers' knowledge gaps in leveraging it within educational contexts. By shedding light on these issues, the researcher aims to explore potential strategies and interventions to bridge this gap and enhance the quality of education for Nigerian learners.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is hinged on the Language Acquisition Theory

Language Acquisition Theory

Language acquisition is a complex process that has been studied from various theoretical perspectives.

Three prominent theories in the field of language acquisition are behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism. Each theory offers unique insights into how language is learned and the implications for mother tongue education.

Behaviourism

Behaviorism, which emerged in the early 20th century, posits that language acquisition occurs through imitation, reinforcement, and conditioning. According to behaviourist theory, language learning is primarily a result of stimulus-response associations and habit formation (Skinner, 1957). Children learn language by observing and imitating the speech patterns of those around them, and through reinforcement from caregivers for correct linguistic behaviours.

In the context of mother tongue education, behaviourism suggests that children acquire their native language through exposure to and interaction with speakers of that language. Caregivers play a crucial role in providing linguistic input and reinforcing correct language use through praise and encouragement. Language learning environments that provide ample opportunities for children to hear and use their mother tongue in meaningful contexts are essential for facilitating language acquisition based on behaviourist principles.

Cognitivism

Cognitivism emerged in the mid-20th century as a reaction to behaviourism, emphasising the role of cognitive processes such as memory, attention, and problem-solving in language acquisition (Piaget, 1952). According to cognitivist theory, language learning involves the internalisation of linguistic structures through cognitive processes such as

schema formation, categorisation, and hypothesis testing.

In the context of mother tongue education, cognitivism highlights the importance of providing learners with opportunities for active engagement and meaningful interaction with language. Children learn their native language by constructing mental representations of linguistic rules and patterns based on their experiences and observations. Teachers can support this process by creating language-rich environments that encourage exploration, experimentation, and discovery. Additionally, scaffolding and providing explicit instruction can help learners develop metacognitive strategies for monitoring and regulating their language use.

Constructivism:

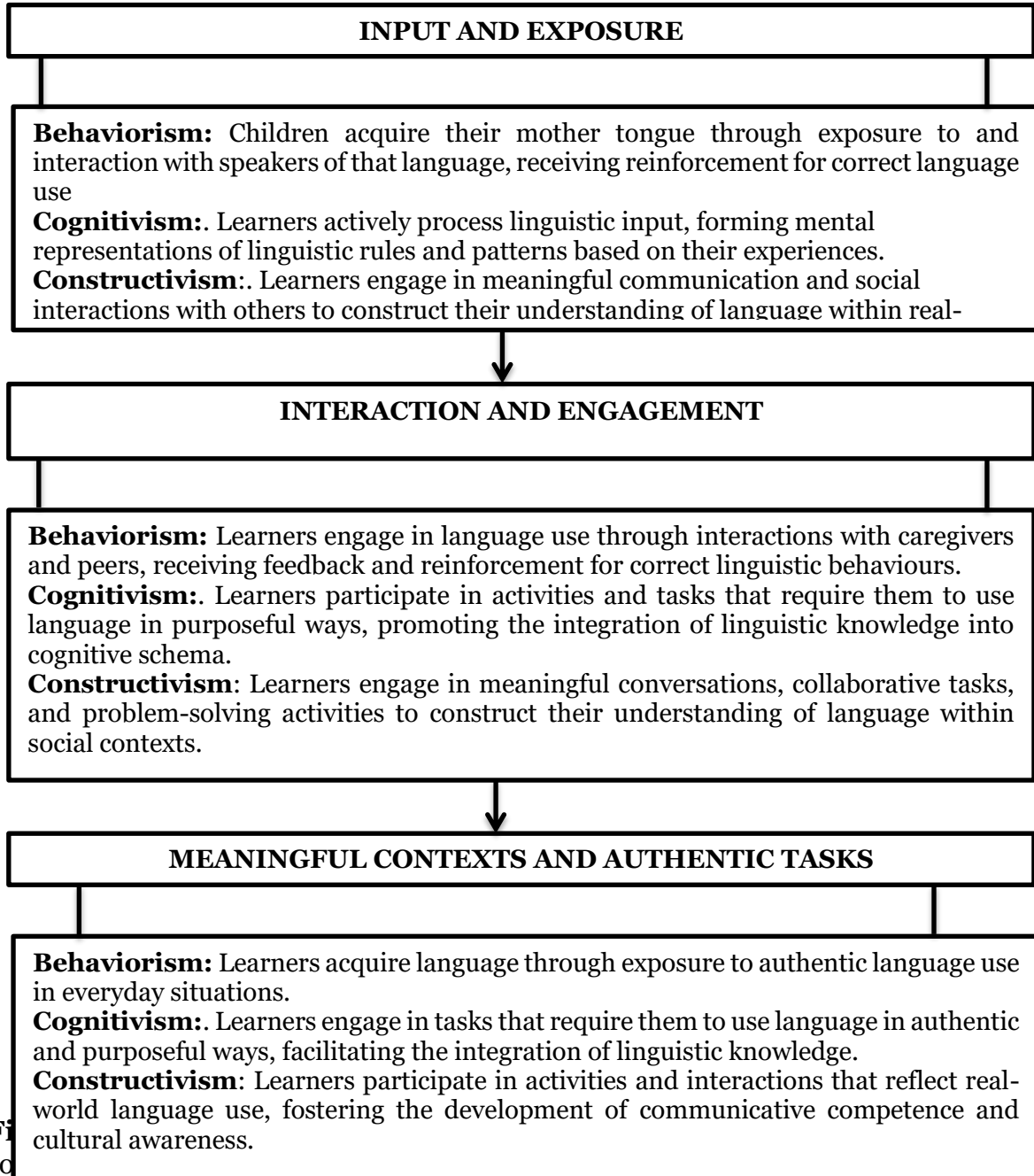
Constructivism, influenced by the work of Piaget and Vygotsky, views language acquisition as a social and collaborative process of knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978). According to constructivist theory, language learning occurs through active engagement in meaningful tasks and social interactions with more knowledgeable others. Learners construct their understanding of language by participating in authentic communicative activities and negotiating meaning with peers and teachers.

In the context of mother tongue education, constructivism emphasises the importance of creating inclusive learning communities where learners feel supported and valued for their linguistic diversity. Children learn their native language by participating in meaningful conversations, storytelling, and collaborative problem-solving activities. Teachers serve as facilitators of learning, guiding students in exploring and making sense of linguistic concepts within real-world

contexts. By providing opportunities for authentic communication and promoting a culture of respect for

linguistic diversity, mother tongue education can foster language development and cultural identity.

Conceptual Framework



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This conceptual framework integrates principles from behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism to provide a comprehensive understanding of language acquisition and its implications for mother tongue education. By considering the role of

input and exposure, interaction and engagement, and meaningful contexts and tasks, teachers can design effective instructional strategies and create supportive learning environments that facilitate language learning and promote linguistic and cultural diversity.

This integrated approach acknowledges that language acquisition is a complex process influenced by cognitive, social, and affective factors. By incorporating elements from behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism, teachers can address the diverse needs and preferences of learners and promote inclusive and effective mother tongue education practices.

Defining Mother Tongue According to Various Perspectives:

1. **Linguistic Perspective:** From a linguistic standpoint, the mother tongue, also known as L1, refers to the first language that an individual acquires naturally in childhood, typically from their parents or immediate environment (Baker, 2011). It is the language in which a person has the highest proficiency and fluency, serving as the foundation for linguistic development and communication throughout their life.
2. **Cultural Perspective:** From a cultural perspective, the mother tongue encompasses more than just linguistic elements; it embodies cultural identity, heritage, and belonging (García & Wei, 2014). The mother tongue is intimately tied to a person's cultural background, reflecting their unique cultural identity, values, and traditions. It serves as a symbol of cultural pride and continuity, connecting individuals to their cultural roots and community.
3. **Psychological Perspective:** Psychologically, the mother tongue plays a crucial role in cognitive development, emotional expression, and identity formation (Cummins, 2008). It is

the language through which individuals first make sense of the world, shaping their thoughts, perceptions, and experiences. The mother tongue influences cognitive processes such as memory, reasoning, and problem-solving, impacting individuals' cognitive development and worldview.

Importance of Mother Tongue in Cultural Transmission and Learning:

The importance of the mother tongue in cultural transmission and learning is evident in several ways:

1. **Preservation of Cultural Heritage:** The mother tongue serves as a vehicle for preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge, traditions, and values from one generation to the next (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Through the mother tongue, cultural narratives, folklore, and oral traditions are preserved, ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage and identity within communities.
2. **Identity and Belonging:** The mother tongue is central to individuals' sense of identity and belonging within their cultural community (García & Wei, 2014). Speaking the mother tongue fosters a sense of connection and belonging to one's cultural group, affirming individuals' cultural identity and strengthening social bonds within the community.
3. **Effective Communication and Expression:** Proficiency in the mother tongue enables clear and effective communication, facilitating meaningful interpersonal connections and relationships (Cummins, 2008). The mother tongue allows individuals to express thoughts,

emotions, and experiences with precision and nuance, enhancing communication skills and social interaction within cultural contexts.

4. **Cognitive Development and Learning:** Education in the mother tongue has been linked to enhanced cognitive development and academic achievement (UNESCO, 2003). Children learn best when instruction is delivered in their mother tongue, as it provides a familiar and accessible linguistic context for learning. Proficiency in the mother tongue lays a strong foundation for the acquisition of additional languages and academic success across various subject areas.

Challenges in Implementing Mother Tongue Education

Despite its benefits, the effective use of mother tongue in education faces several challenges. These challenges hamper the ability to convey concepts effectively and impede students' comprehension and learning outcomes.

Challenges faced in effectively integrating mother tongue into education in Nigeria

1. **Lack of Resources:** One of the primary obstacles is the lack of resources, including textbooks, teaching materials, and trained personnel, in indigenous languages (Ogunsiji, 2017). Many schools in Nigeria struggle to access appropriate resources in the mother tongue, hindering effective integration into the curriculum.
2. **Language Policy and Standardisation:** Nigeria's diverse linguistic landscape presents challenges in standardising and implementing

language policies that prioritise the mother tongue in education (Tadfor, 2013). The absence of a clear and comprehensive language policy exacerbates the challenges faced in integrating the mother tongue effectively.

3. **Teacher Training and Proficiency:** Many teachers in Nigeria lack training and proficiency in using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). The limited availability of teacher training programs in indigenous languages impedes the capacity of teachers to effectively integrate the mother tongue into their teaching practices.
4. **Socio-economic Factors:** Socio-economic factors, such as poverty and urbanisation, contribute to the marginalisation of indigenous languages in education (Ogunsiji, 2017). Children from marginalised communities often face barriers to accessing quality education in their mother tongue, further perpetuating inequalities in educational outcomes.
5. **Perceived Prestige of English:** English is often perceived as the language of prestige and opportunity in Nigeria, leading to a preference for English-medium education among parents and policymakers (Ogunsiji, 2017). This preference undermines efforts to promote the use of indigenous languages in education and perpetuates the marginalisation of minority languages.

The Impact of these Challenges on Teaching Practices and Students' Outcomes

1. **Limited Language Competency:** The lack of teacher proficiency in the mother tongue hampers their ability to effectively

deliver instruction in indigenous languages. This limitation restricts teachers' capacity to provide meaningful explanations, engage students in meaningful discussions, and assess learning effectively.

2. **Reduced Student Engagement:** Inadequate resources and instructional materials in the mother tongue contribute to decreased student engagement and participation in the classroom. Students may struggle to comprehend lessons delivered in a language they are less proficient in, leading to disengagement and decreased motivation to learn.
3. **Language Shift and Loss:** The dominance of English in education contributes to language shift and loss, as students prioritise English proficiency over their indigenous languages (Tadfor, 2013). This trend perpetuates the marginalisation of indigenous languages and erodes cultural identity and heritage among younger generations.
4. **Limited Academic Achievement:** The inability to effectively integrate the mother tongue into education hinders students' academic achievement, particularly in early grades (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Research indicates that mother tongue-based education leads to better academic outcomes, including improved literacy rates and higher achievement levels.
5. **Inequality in Education:** The challenges faced in integrating the mother tongue into education exacerbate existing inequalities in access to quality education. Children from marginalised communities, who predominantly speak indigenous languages, are

disproportionately affected by the lack of mother tongue-based education thereby perpetuating disparities in educational outcomes.

The Knowledge Gap among Teachers

The knowledge gap among teachers refers to the disparity between the level of proficiency and understanding required to effectively integrate the mother tongue into education and the actual competence possessed by many teachers. This gap has become a significant obstacle in implementing mother tongue education initiatives worldwide, including Nigeria.

Research consistently indicates that many teachers lack the necessary proficiency in using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction. For instance, in Nigeria, where multiple indigenous languages are spoken, teachers often face challenges in effectively Utilising the mother tongue in the classroom due to limited language proficiency (Ogunsiji, 2017). This deficiency extends to speaking, writing, and teaching in the mother tongue, thereby hindering their ability to deliver quality instruction.

The knowledge gap among teachers in Nigeria regarding proficiency in Utilising the mother tongue effectively is a significant challenge in the country's education system. Despite the linguistic diversity present in Nigeria, where over 500 languages are spoken, many teachers face difficulties in effectively integrating the mother tongue into their teaching practices (Adegbija, 2012).

One of the primary reasons for this knowledge gap is the historical emphasis on English as the primary medium of instruction in Nigerian schools, inherited from the colonial era

(Adegbija, 2012). As a result, many teachers may lack proficiency in indigenous languages, which are often the mother tongues of their students. This deficiency extends to speaking, writing, and teaching in indigenous languages, thereby hindering teachers' ability to effectively deliver instruction in the mother tongue.

Furthermore, limited access to quality teacher training programmes and professional development opportunities in mother tongue education exacerbates the knowledge gap among teachers (Eze, 2012). Teachers may not receive sufficient support or resources to develop their language skills and instructional practices in indigenous languages, leading to a lack of confidence and proficiency in using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction.

Societal attitudes and perceptions regarding the prestige and utility of English versus indigenous languages also contribute to the knowledge gap among teachers in Nigeria (Eze, 2012). English is often perceived as the language of opportunity and upward mobility, leading teachers and policymakers to prioritise proficiency in English over indigenous languages. Consequently, teachers may not prioritise developing proficiency in the mother tongue, further widening the knowledge gap.

Implications

The knowledge gap among teachers in Nigeria regarding proficiency in utilising the mother tongue effectively has significant implications for instructional quality, student learning outcomes, and the overall educational system in the country.

1. **Instructional Quality:** The proficiency gap among teachers hampers instructional quality in classrooms across Nigeria.

Adegbija (2012) notes that when educators lack proficiency in the mother tongue, they may struggle to effectively convey concepts, explain complex topics, and engage students in meaningful learning experiences. This deficiency can lead to ineffective teaching practices, including reliance on non-native languages as the medium of instruction.

2. **Student Learning Outcomes:** The knowledge gap among teachers adversely affects student learning outcomes, particularly for students from minority language backgrounds. Eze (2012) suggests that when teachers are not proficient in the mother tongue, students may experience difficulties in understanding the material being taught, leading to decreased comprehension and academic achievement. This perpetuates inequalities in educational outcomes and hinders students' overall academic success.
3. **Cultural Preservation:** The lack of proficiency among teachers in utilising the mother tongue effectively contributes to the erosion of indigenous languages and cultural heritage in Nigeria. According to Adegbija (2012), indigenous languages play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity, heritage, and traditional knowledge within communities. However, when educators are unable to teach effectively in the mother tongue, there is a risk of language shift and loss, undermining efforts to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity.
4. **Equitable Access to Education:** The knowledge gap among teachers exacerbates inequalities in access to quality education for students in Nigeria. Students from minority language

backgrounds may face additional barriers to learning when teachers are not proficient in their mother tongue. This perpetuates cycles of marginalisation and exclusion, limiting opportunities for academic success and socio-economic advancement among disadvantaged communities (Eze, 2012).

5. **Long-term Educational Development:** Addressing the knowledge gap among teachers is crucial for the long-term educational development of Nigeria. Ogunsiji (2017) suggests that investing in teacher training and professional development programmes focused on developing proficiency in the mother tongue can help improve instructional quality, enhance student learning outcomes, and promote inclusive and culturally responsive education. By prioritising the use of the mother tongue in education, Nigeria can foster linguistic diversity, preserve cultural heritage, and build a more equitable and inclusive educational system for future generations.

Conclusion

Recognising the importance of the mother tongue in education and addressing the knowledge gap among teachers are crucial steps towards building an equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive educational system in Nigeria. By prioritising mother tongue education and providing adequate support and resources for teachers, Nigeria can foster linguistic diversity, preserve cultural heritage, and promote educational equity and excellence for all students.

Recommendations

Based on the identified challenges and implications, the following recommendations were made:

1. Government should implement comprehensive teacher training programs focused on developing proficiency in the mother tongue. Provide educators with opportunities for professional development workshops, courses, and resources specifically tailored to enhance their language skills and instructional practices in indigenous languages.
2. The Nigeria Ministries of Education should create and distribute high-quality teaching materials, textbooks, and resources in indigenous languages to support mother tongue education. Collaborate with local communities, language experts, and educational institutions to develop culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate materials that align with the curriculum.
3. Education Policy Makers should advocate for language policy reforms that prioritise the use of the mother tongue in education. They should encourage policymakers to enact legislation and guidelines that support mother tongue-based education initiatives, including the development of language-in-education policies and standards.
4. There should be collaboration and partnerships between government agencies, educational institutions, NGOs, community organisations, and other stakeholders to support mother tongue education initiatives. Pool resources, expertise, and best practices to enhance the implementation and sustainability of programmes.
5. The government should raise awareness and sensitise

- stakeholders, including parents, educators, policymakers, and the broader community, about the importance of mother tongue education. Highlight the benefits of bilingualism, cultural preservation, and academic achievement associated with mother tongue-based instruction.
6. Education policy makers should leverage technology to support mother tongue education initiatives. They should develop digital learning platforms, mobile applications, and online resources in indigenous languages to supplement classroom instruction and provide students with additional opportunities for language practice and enrichment.
 7. The school authorities in collaboration with the ministry of education should engage local communities in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of mother tongue education programmes. Consult community members, elders, and language speakers to ensure cultural relevance, authenticity, and sustainability of initiatives.
 8. The ministry of education should establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness and impact of mother tongue education initiatives. Collect data on student outcomes, teacher competencies, resource utilisation, and community engagement to inform decision-making and improve programmatic interventions.
 9. The state and federal government should provide incentives and recognition for teachers and schools that demonstrate excellence in mother tongue education. Recognise and reward educators who invest in developing proficiency in indigenous

- languages and implementing innovative instructional practices.
10. The state and federal government should allocate adequate funding and resources to sustain mother tongue education initiatives over the long term. Prioritise investments in teacher training, curriculum development, infrastructure, and community outreach to ensure the continuity and scalability of programs.

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