

- Experts in education and language are unanimous that school children or young students can learn fastest when the vernacular or their mother tongue is used in teaching them to as late in their schooling as possible. The following article on this subject is taken from a report of UNESCO scholars.

MOTHER TONGUE AND SECOND LANGUAGE

It is through his mother tongue that every human being first learns to formulate and express his ideas about himself and about the world in which he lives. This language in which he first learns to express his ideas need not be the language which his parents use; nor need it be the language he first learns to speak, since special circumstances may cause him to abandon this language more or less completely at an early age.

Every child is born into a cultural environment; the language is both a part of, and an expression of, that environment. Thus the acquiring of this language (his 'mother tongue') is a part of the process by which a child absorbs the cultural environment; it can, then, be said that this language

plays an important part in moulding the child's early concepts. He will, therefore, find it difficult to grasp any new concept which is so alien to his cultural environment that it cannot readily find expression in his mother tongue. If a foreign language belongs to a culture very little different from his own (as for example French is to an English child) the child's chief difficulties in learning that language will be only linguistic. But if the foreign language belongs to a culture very different from his own (as for example English to a Nigerian child), then his learning difficulties are greatly increased; he comes into contact, not only with a new language, but also with new concepts. Similar considerations apply to adults.

Ideas which have been formulated in one language are so difficult to express through the modes of another, that a person habitually faced with this task can readily lose his facility to express himself. A child, faced with this task at an age when his powers of self-expression even in his mother tongue are but incompletely developed, may possibly never achieve adequate self-expression.

For these reasons it is important that every effort should be made to provide education in the mother tongue.

On educational grounds we recommend that the use of the mother tongue be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. In particular, pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue, because they understand it best and because to begin their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and school as small as possible.

Even when the child has been at school long enough to be familiar with school

life, he still has to cope with the incessant stream of lessons in many different subjects. He will find a lesson in geography or almost any other subject easier if he is taught it in his mother tongue. To expect him to deal with new information or ideas presented to him in an unfamiliar language is to impose on him a double burden, and he will make slower progress.

The use of the mother tongue will promote better understanding between the home and the school when the child is taught in the language of the home. What he learns can easily be expressed or applied in the home. Moreover, the parents will be in a better position to understand the problems of the school and in some measure to help the school in the education of the child.

Several objections often urged against the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, which we consider unsound. Later we examine others which do in fact limit the extent to which the mother tongue

can be used in certain circumstances.

'This language has no grammar and no alphabet. Frequently someone who has not analyzed the languages of people without a modern technology or civilization is of the opinion that a language which has never been written has no grammar. This is not true. Every language, even an unwritten one has its consistent patterns or rules by which its speakers combine words into sentences, and so on. Often such grammatical structure is as complicated or as regular as those of any world language. In fact, we hold that there is nothing in the structure of any language which precludes it from becoming a vehicle of modern civilization.

'The child already knows his mother tongue.' The second objection is that the child already knows his own language before he comes to school, and that there is no need for the school to teach it to him. There are two replies to this. In the first place, he has not completely learnt it before coming to

school. He has learnt it enough for his own childish purposes, but he will still need to develop his knowledge of it as he grows older. The English or French child devotes a great part of his time throughout his school career to studying his mother tongue. In the second place, the school is not merely teaching the child his mother tongue; it is using his mother tongue as the most effective means of teaching him other things.

'The use of the mother tongue will prevent acquisition of the second language.' Some people claim that it is impossible for children to acquire a good use of the second language unless the school adopts the second language as a medium of instruction from the very beginning. In fact, it is on the basis of this action that some schools in the past have actually forbidden any use whatsoever of the vernacular anywhere in the school. However, recent experience in many places proves that an equal or better command of the second language can be imparted if the school

begins with the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, subsequently introducing the second language as a subject of instruction.

'Using the vernacular impedes national unity.' It cannot be denied that the business of government is easier in a monolingual than in a multilingual nation. However, it does not follow that legislation or school policy requiring the use of the official language at all times will give the same results as actual monolingualism.

On the contrary, it is fairly likely that absolute insistence on the use of the national language by people of another mother tongue may have a negative effect, leading the local groups to withdraw in some measure from the national life. In any event, it seems clear that the national interests are best served by *optimum advancement* of education, and this in turn can be promoted by the use of the local language as a medium of instruction, at least at the beginning of the school programme.

There are, however, cer-

tain practical difficulties — some temporary, some permanent — which may compel the school authorities to abandon the use of the vernacular as the medium of instruction at some stage.

Inadequacy of the vocabulary. The first difficulty is that the language may not yet have a vocabulary sufficient for the needs of the curriculum. In this case a second language will have to be introduced at an early stage, and as soon as the pupils have learnt enough of it the second language can become the medium of instruction. The transition to a second language should normally take place gradually and should be made as smooth and as psychologically harmless as possible. Thus, if the second language is completely different from the mother tongue it should be taught as a subject for some years, and until such time as the child has an adequate working knowledge of it, before it is brought into use as a full teaching medium.

Shortage of educational materials. One of the most important and difficult pro-

blems connected with the use of the vernacular languages in education is that of providing reading materials. It will often happen that even a language which is quite capable of being used as a medium of instruction will be almost or entirely without school books or other materials.

Multiplicity of languages in a locality. If a given locality has a variety of languages it may be difficult to provide schooling in each mother tongue simply because there are too few students speaking certain of the languages. In such cases it may be necessary to select one of the languages as the medium of instruction, at the cost of using a language other than the mother tongue of some of the students. Before accepting this necessity, the school should seek ways and means to arrange instruction groups by mother tongue.

It must be recorded that there is a wide variation in the strength and validity of

these reasons for not using the mother tongue. In some areas they are indeed very strong; in others they are advanced without complete justification.

We must here lay down as a general principle what must have already been made apparent by our general approach to the problem: that in order to ease the burden on the child, the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction as far up the educational ladder as the conditions permit (in other words that the transfer to a second language, if necessary, should be deferred to as late a stage as possible); and that authorities should do everything in their power to create the conditions which will make for an ever-increasing extension of schooling in the mother tongue, and make the transition from mother tongue to second language as smooth and as psychologically harmless as possible. — *Excerpts from The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education (UNESCO).*