

Mother Tongue: The Language of Heart and Mind

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Today we are all witnessing an aspect of globalization which is the increasing movement of people from one country to another for different purposes, such as education, desire for a better life, the need for employment, escape from conflicts between groups including oppression of one group by another, or natural disasters. Whatever the reason, while such phenomenon may have a lot of benefits, living in another country affects one's mother tongue. In my article I want to discuss why parents and educators should support children learning and retaining their native language. As a parent living far from my native country I have often experienced the fear that my children would not learn their mother language well. As an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher I have strongly encouraged my ESL students to develop literacy in their mother tongue and to take pride in their culture and the country they originated in.

Every language spoken in the world represents a special culture, melody, color, and asset and to everyone the mother language is certainly one of the most precious treasures in our lives. It's a duty and responsibility to preserve it and pass it down from generation to generation. Whether we are urged by necessity or because of other reasons, learning another language brings a lot of advantages in our life. A new language opens a new window in

our world view and makes us more aware, open-minded, and respectful to other cultures, lifestyles, customs and beliefs. Moreover, knowing another language has been proven to contribute to helping us understand our mother tongue better. However, much research indicates that most children eventually learn a second, or even more, languages to a native-like fluency level, what immigrant families are not often aware of is that many of their children are at risk of losing their mother tongue.

Mother language for emotional and mental growth

Mother language has a very powerful impact in the formation of the individual. Our first language, the beautiful sounds of which one hears and gets familiar with before being born while in the womb, has such an important role in shaping our thoughts and emotions. A child's psychological and personality development will depend upon what has been conveyed through the mother tongue. With this in mind, as psychologists say, it matters tremendously that language expressions and vocabulary are chosen with care when we talk to children. A child's first comprehension of the world around him, the learning of concepts and skills, and his perception of existence, starts with the language that is first taught to him, his mother tongue. In the same manner, a child expresses his first feelings,

his happiness, fears, and his first words through his mother tongue. Mother language has such an important role in framing our thinking, emotions and spiritual world, because the most important stage of our life, childhood, is spent in its imprints. A strong bond between a child and his parents (especially mother) is established by virtue of love, compassion, body language, and also through the most important one, which is the verbal language. When a person speaks their mother tongue, a direct connection establishes between heart, brain and tongue. Our personality, character, modesty, shyness, defects, our skills, and all other hidden characteristics become truly revealed through the mother tongue because the sound of the mother tongue in the ear and its meaning in the heart give us trust and confidence. "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart," says Nelson Mandela. I came across an interesting article in support of the above. A study was carried out on fifteen Italian interpreters who were working for the European Union and translating in English and Italian. The interpreters were all extremely fluent in English. The study revealed surprising differences in brain activity when the subjects were shown words in their native language versus in other languages they spoke. About 170 milliseconds after a word was shown, the researchers recorded a peak in electrical activity in the left side of the brain, in an area that recognizes letters as part of words before their meaning is interpreted. These brain

waves had much higher amplitude when the word was in Italian, the language the interpreters had learned before age five. "The findings show how differently the brain absorbs and recalls languages learned in early childhood and later in life," said Alice Mado Proverbio, a professor of cognitive electrophysiology at the Milano-Bicocca University in Milan. Proverbio attributed the differences to the fact that the brain absorbs the mother tongue at a time when it is also storing early visual, acoustic, emotional and other nonlinguistic knowledge. This means that the native language triggers a series of associations within the brain that show up as increased electrical activity. "Our mother tongue is the language we use to think, dream and feel emotion," Proverbio said.

Mother tongue is an indicator of cultural identity

A child connects to his parents, family, relatives, culture, history, identity and religion through his mother tongue. Native language links the child with the culture of the society the child comes from and shapes his identity. A lot of children from immigrant families, who don't know their native language well, are at a crossroads of identity crisis. When a child doesn't know his language well we cannot say that he will be nurtured with his culture properly for the fact that the relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted. Mother tongue is one of the most powerful tools used to preserve and convey culture and cultural ties. Children who are unaware of their culture, their

language, and their history will lose confidence in themselves, the family, society and the nation to which they belong and will have no other option than seeking an alternate identity. A child will identify himself with the language and culture he knows best. For this reason, the attitudes and beliefs of immigrant parents are so important in this aspect. If they want to prevent this from happening they should find ways to help their children maintain and improve their mother language without neglecting to give affirmative messages and keeping positive attitudes about other cultures. We must not also forget that we live in a multicultural society and we should teach our children to learn about other cultures and respect them as well.

Mother tongue provides the basis for learning another language

Jim Cummins also underscores the importance of preserving mother tongue: “Children who come to school with a strong foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the language used at school. When parents or caregivers are able to spend time with their children and tell stories or discuss issues with them in a way that develops their mother tongue vocabulary and concepts, children come to school well prepared to learn the language of their immigrant country and succeed educationally.”

The ability to converse in a language is developed

through the mother tongue. The child will get familiarized with the nuances of a language, how to learn it and use it, and this will enable him or her to learn other languages as well. A strong foundation in their first language will contribute to learning another language and help them develop stronger literacy skills in the school language, because children’s literacy knowledge and abilities transfer across languages from mother tongue to the language the child is learning at school. When children continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout their primary school years they gain a deeper understanding of language and gradually acquire knowledge about how it can be manipulated and applied in different ways. They explore the similarities and differences between languages. Unfortunately, for many bilingual children who have little mother tongue support at home, once they start school their mother tongue is gradually replaced by the majority or dominantly used language, especially in the early school years. Some parents and educators believe that in order for children to learn a second language quickly and succeed at school children should use the majority language not only at school, but even at home. In fact the opposite is true. Children can learn two or more languages at the same time. We know children who learn to speak fluently two or three languages in some countries where more than one language are spoken. Researches show that children from immigrant families learn the social majority language in the early years at school very quickly, although it takes longer to learn academic

language, and can lose their ability to use their mother tongues easily. They can lose it even in the home context if the mother language is not used constantly at home or among peers of the same community. They may retain comprehension, but will use the majority language with siblings, friends, and parents. Unfortunately, I often see kids from the same minority community speak the majority language instead of their mother tongue among themselves, even when they are outside school. Preferring second language to first language most often occurs because children do not know how to express themselves fluently in their mother tongue in certain contexts and situations. They lack vocabulary and literal expressions in the mother tongue and find it easier to express themselves in the majority language. As children grow up, parents see the linguistic gap between them and their children has widened and leading to an emotional disconnection.

How to promote mother tongue

Keeping mother tongue in a foreign country does not happen spontaneously. Instead, it is an achievement that requires commitment and determination, especially from the family. Parents must establish a strong home language policy and make consistent efforts to help their children develop good literacy skills in their first language.

Here are some ideas about how parents can promote learning mother tongue:

- The first step parents should take is make children love mother tongue by finding ways that motivate and encourage its learning.
- Leave second language to the outside world and speak to children only in your mother tongue at home.
- Devote time each day to reading and writing in mother tongue with children until they become able to read and write it independently.
- Tell stories and discuss interesting topics such as your childhood-children love to hear about parents' childhoods-your home country celebrations, because this will develop both their oral and vocabulary skills.
- Have books and multimedia for children in the home language.
- Provide a reward system and make learning mother language competitive among children.
- Watch TV series or favorite cartoons with them in the target language.
- Listen to songs in mother tongue.
- Send children to centers that offer courses and other types of learning in your language.
- Provide contexts where children can use home language such as visits to country of origin, organize picnics, cultural events, or celebrations with families from the same community.
- Have them keep journals in home language.