

Stop English from obstructing Ghanaian children learning

Prince Hamid Armah, PhD | 2nd September, 2015

A report published on myjoyonline.com regarding the language policy for Mauritius education system has reemphasized the need to stop language from obstructing children learning in Ghana (see "*Mauritius: Complex education; speak Creole, read English and learn in French*", 01/09/2015).

In this article, I attempt to highlight some of the implementation setbacks to the current language policy for schools, specific to the mathematics curriculum. Although Ghana has not yet developed any national language apart from English, the official medium of instruction in the primary school, particularly the lower ages, is the children's first language (i.e. mother tongue). Given that there are no readily available words in most Ghanaian languages for many mathematical terms and symbols, teachers have been advised to blend the English and local languages when teaching, consistent with what pertains in other countries (such as South Africa and India). In this situation, they can use a language that will facilitate the development and acquisition of mathematical concepts and subsequently expose children to the mathematical ideas fully in English at later years. Consistent with this assumption, the upper primary curriculum makes specific recommendations that encourage children to express and articulate their explanations, thinking and reasoning in English so that their mathematical communication skills may be developed and strengthened.

However, in practice, many public or private schools in Ghana exclusively use English language for teaching, including at early grades due to a number of impeding factors to implementation fidelity (the degree to which a policy is delivered as planned). Given the great multiplicity of Ghanaian languages, the most obvious of these factors is how to provide for a class of children with diverse home languages as is increasingly the case in both urban and rural school settings. Most children, from birth, often speak one or more of the 78 or so local languages at home, their community, and even at the playground, with limited exposure to English until they enter school. Yet, once at school they are expected not only to understand what their teachers are teaching them in a language that they do not understand, but perhaps more importantly learn to read and

write in this language including learning mathematics. The consequence is that they will learn to copy and often memorise the words and numbers, but won't understand them and can't apply them meaningfully. Under such circumstances, many children might usually drop out of school entirely, while others might even fail their examinations and/or spend years repeating classes. This has a huge implication for developing the critical mass of young people with the requisite attitudes and skills to contribute to national development.

Indeed, there are situations in which the mother tongue of a child is different from the local language being used as the medium of instruction in the school. This can be quite complex and challenging for classroom teachers particularly during instructional sessions. It would appear that children transferred from one local area to another might have to learn different Ghanaian languages at different times in their schooling, which seem very unsustainable in the long-term. The same can be said of teachers too. Each time they are transferred to other locations, they must endeavour to understand the local language in the area to be able to implement the local language policy to the latter. This has the tendency of breeding teachers who have limited ability to communicate in the local language of their posted schools, undermining the developmental rationale of the language policy.

For instance, evidence from a limited literacy intervention programme in Ghana (such as the National Literacy Acceleration Program) suggests that there are unacceptably high percentages of teachers in lower primary classrooms who are unable to read or write the local language to be used for instruction in the schools, whether in public or private schools. This therefore calls for a coordinated literacy intervention programme to help teachers overcome these instructional impediments. In my own PhD thesis, I found this language problem to be a significant factor in teacher's instructional decisions, particularly in relation to adopting learner-centred teaching approaches.

A large body of studies have suggested that such inappropriate use of school language works against efforts to strengthen the quality of education, thereby wasting limited resources. However, in light of the fact that there are major ethnic and political differences associated with each of the local languages written and spoken in Ghana, it might not be advisable to recommend an adoption of one national local language as a medium of instruction in schools. The fundamental issue that needs to drive this language policy discussion must emphasise the need

for flexibility in the choice of language for instruction to ensure that either language (Ghanaian language or English) does not obstruct children from learning mathematics.

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