Education on the African continent has long failed the majority of its learners. This systemic failure can be measured in high drop-out and repeater rates, low learner participation and poor academic results. A major cause of this failure has been the under-utilisation of learners' home or first languages in schooling, in favour of the former colonial languages. Taking a panoramic view of sub-Saharan Africa with a particular focus on the Nigerian Six-Year Primary Project, this paper provides compelling reasons for why the first language should be used as a medium of instruction, taught as a subject, and drawn upon as a resource for cultural learning beyond junior primary schooling. In the process of advocating learning in, with and from the first language, Professor Obanya refutes counter-arguments commonly voiced by well-meaning sceptics.

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Learning In, With, and From the First Language

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Contents

Abstract

Kiswahili

Elimu bara la Africa imeshindwa ku kudhi malengo ya walio wengi. Na hii inaonekana dhahiri kwa kutathmini idadi ya wanafunzi wasiomaliza shule, wanaorudia, ushirikishwaji mdogo wa wasomaji katika maswala ya elimu na matokea mabaya ya kitaluma. Sababu kubwa ya kushindwa huko inatokana na kutotilia maanani umuhimu wa matumizi ya lugha ya nyumbani au ya kwanza katika kufundishia mashuleni, badala yake lugha za kikoloni ndizo zinazotiliwa mkazo. Tukiangalia kwa undani Afrika iliyoko kusini mwa jangwa la Sahara na hasa tukitumia mfano wa mradi wa miaka sita wa elimu ya msing huko Nigeria, makala hii inatoa sababu muhimu kutetea umuhimu wa kutumia lugha ya kwanza kama lugha ya kufundishia, kufundishwa kama somo, na katika kudumisha mila na desturi na hata baada ya elimu ya msingi. Professor Obanya nae anatoa mchango wake kwa kupinga hoja za watalaam wengine ambao kwa nia nzuri wameonyesha wasiwasi wao kuhusu matumizi ya lugha ya kwanza kama chombo cha kufundishia.

French

Depuis longtemps le système éducatif africain a failli aux besoins de la majorité de ses apprenants. Cet échec systématique peut être perçu notamment dans le taux élevé d'échecs et de déperditions scolaires, le faible taux de participation des apprenants ainsi que des résultats académiques médiocres. Une des causes majeures de cet échec demeure la négligence de la langue maternelle de l'apprenant au profit de la langue du jadis colonisateur. Cet article présente une vue panoramique de l'Afrique sud saharienne et en particulier l'expérience d'un projet de six ans dans quelques écoles primaires du Nigeria. Il en ressort des raisons très valables pour une présence plus accrue de l'enseignement basé sur la langue maternelle enseignée comme matière mais aussi utilisée comme ressource pour l'apprentissage culturel au-delà du degré élémentaire de l'enseignement primaire. Dans sa plaidoirie pour l'apprentissage en, avec et par la langue maternelle, le Professeur Obanya réfute les arguments souvent avancés par les septiques à ce sujet.

Portuguese

Há muito tempo, o ensino nos países da África tem traido a maioria dos seus alunos. Essa falha sistêmica mostra-se claramente nos índices elevadíssimos de desistência, repetição e reprovação acadêmica, e na participação fraca dos alunos. Uma das causas principais desta situação tem sido a sob-utilização das línguas maternas, ou seja das línguas utilizadas em

casa pelos alunos, a favor dos idiomas nacionais dos ex-poderes coloniais. De um ponto da vista panorâmica, o trabalho abrange toda a África ao sul do Sahara, com enfase especial no Projecto Primário Sexenal Nigériano, e fornece argumentos convincentes para a utilização da língua materna como a língua de ensino. No mesmo tempo, estas línguas devem ser leccionadas como disciplinas em si, e utilizadas como um recurso cultural pós-primário. O Professor Obanya, na sua advocacia para a aprendizagem em, com e a partir de línguas maternas, consegue refutar os contra-argumentos comuns de cépticos bem intencionados.

English

Education on the African continent has long failed the majority of its learners. This systemic failure can be measured in high drop-out and repeater rates, low learner participation and poor academic results. A major cause of this failure has been the under-utilisation of learners' home or first languages in schooling, in favour of the former colonial languages. Taking a panoramic view of sub-Saharan Africa with a particular focus on the Nigerian Six-Year Primary Project, this paper provides compelling reasons for why the first language should be used as a medium of instruction, taught as a subject, and drawn upon as a resource for cultural learning beyond junior primary schooling. In the process of advocating learning in, with and from the first language, Professor Obanya refutes counter-arguments commonly voiced by well-meaning sceptics.

Quality is a major problem area of education the world over. In Nigeria, and on the African continent, quality has been a particularly burning issue in recent years. There has been a tremendous increase in numbers of learners and of institutions, as well as in the amount of money spent on education. The impact of the expansion phenomenon has been MORE but not BETTER education. It has been quantitative increase and expansion, rather than qualitative improvement.

The development of quality indicators to measure genuine educational progress has been a major preoccupation of researchers and development agencies in the field of education. We have for our part been involved for some time in trying to define what constitutes quality in education, and have come up with the notion of a three-dimensional construct, as illustrated in Table 1.

However, an important element that has not been sufficiently taken into account is the role of the language used for and in learning (in addition to the language one is learning from) in either enhancing or inhibiting quality. This discussion is intended to bring attention to this crucial but not insufficiently attended to aspect of quality in education. We will begin with an elucidation of basic concepts and then go on to discuss the educational imperative of ensuring that education programmes (more particularly in Africa) take due accounts of the language we are learning, with, and from.

Key concepts

The first language

The term 'first language' has, in our specific context, five major connotations:
- the language transmitted by the family as members of the 'indigenous language community in a given geographical-linguistic environment' (the mother tongue or native language)
- the non-mother tongue lingua franca (or most widely used language) in the immediate environment of the learner
- the widely spoken language in a community in which the learner is growing up, but which is not necessarily the language of his or her parents, and so not likely to be that of the immediate family
- the first, in strictly chronological order, of the languages learnt and regularly used by an individual
- the most frequently used, the most perfectly mastered (though not necessarily the first in the chronological order of acquisition) by the individual.

The following are typical illustrations of these first-language situations:

- **Situation One:** A learner of Yoruba origin, growing up in a Yoruba-speaking home, in a monolingual Yoruba environment in South-Western Nigeria; or a native Xhosa learner, growing up in a predominantly Xhosa rural environment in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa and using only isiXhosa in all social interactions.

- **Situation Two:** A learner in the southern part of Kaduna State of Nigeria, whose home and family language is Kataf, but whose environment is dominated by Hausa, as a language of wider communication – a similar situation to that of the Ciyao home-language learner in parts of Malawi whose environment is ruled by Chichewa as lingua franca.

- **Situation Three:** A learner from an Izo (Niger Delta) immigrant family living and growing up in Onitsha in South Eastern Nigeria, where Igbo is the community language, a case in which the language of the family might be that of the parents (Izo) but in which the learner operates in the language of the host community (Igbo) once outside the circle of the nuclear family. This same is true of a learner of Casamance (Southern Senegal) parentage living in Dakar (the capital of Senegal) who would possibly speak the language of the parents (Dioula) within the family but for whom the immediate community language is Wolof.

INPUTS	PROCESSES	OUTCOMES
1. SOCIETY	• Popular involvement in implementation (all facets) • Wholesale societal acceptance of the programme	SUCCESSFUL LEARNING • Acquisition of socially desirable intellectual and non-intellectual skills • Continuing interest in learning
2. POLICY	• Adaptability to local conditions • Democratic policy making and review processes	FULLY-FLEDGED SOCIETAL SUPPORT
3. MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK	• Decentralisation/devolution of powers and responsibilities to the grassroots level • Empowerment and autonomy for operators down the line	• Permanent, unqualified societal interest in the promotion of education

INPUTS	PROCESSES	OUTCOMES
4. CURRICULUM	• Responsive to individual and societal needs • Comprehensive coverage of the 3 Hs (the Head, the Heart, the Hands) • Adaptable to changing times, needs, conditions	A WELL-MOTIVATED TEACHING FORCE • Teachers fully devoted to continuous self-improvement for concerted promotion of education
5. TEACHING FORCE	• Quantitatively adequate • Adequately educated and professionally prepared • Pedagogically skilled • Well motivated	A SELF-REGENERATING EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN A LEARNING SOCIETY • The ultimate goal: a committed society, a critical mass of productive/creative citizens, an education system that goes on improving
6. INFRASTRUCTURE	• Quantitatively, aesthetically, and spatially adequate • Learner and teacher friendly • Fully integrated pedagogical spaces: classrooms-laboratories-workrooms-libraries-toilets-recreational facilities, etc.	
7. MATERIALS	• Quantitatively adequate • User friendly, easily exploitable and challenging to both teachers and learners • A judicious mix of print-audio-oral materials • Closely related to the goals of the curriculum	
8. FUNDS	• Quantum (adequacy) of funds • Targeting funds for those things that would really make a difference • Prompt release of funds • Prudent application of funds	

Table 1: A Three-Dimensional Model of Quality in Education

- **Situation Four:** A learner who begins life socialization in a language community, then goes on to acquire that language. In later life (which can also be during childhood and adolescence) the person comes in contact with and masters other languages, each of which is used as a given communication situation demands.
- **Situation Five:** This will apply to any person with a rich bi-multilingual background, who is compelled by socio-linguistic circumstances to use any one of the languages most actively, and most of the time, in a wide variety of situations. As a result, that person acquires an all-round communicative competence in the most frequently used language.

What the five situations show is that the first language could be the mother tongue. It could also be a non-mother tongue. Whether it comes first or last in the chronological order of one's linguistic repertoire, the first language is (in all socio-linguistic conditions) the most frequently used, the most intimately mastered, and the one in which the person with bi-multi-lingual competence feels most at home.

Learning in, with, and from a language

This discussion will make the following distinctions in three related areas of the educational use of language: learning *in*, learning *with*, and learning *from*.

Learning with refers to using the language as subject of instruction. That is, we are learning the language (Dholuo, Kiswahili, isiZulu, Igbo, Lingala, Yoruba, Mandika, Kikongo, XiTsonga, Oshivambo, Hausa, Ewe, etc.), possibly in the language itself.

Learning in refers to situations in which a language is used as medium of instruction, either in a restricted sense (that, is limited to selected subjects) or to a given sub-sector or level of education. Most of the countries of Africa have (for example) language-in-education policies that advocate the use of the first language for instruction in the early stages of formal education.

Learning from can be seen from two main angles: the linguistic and the cultural/educational. In the strictly linguistic sense, it means learning/ acquiring the skills of a particular language for the purpose of use in communication. From the broad educational angle, it means learning from the cultural repertoire of a language. This is a realm that transcends the linguistic wealth of a language to the realms of culture in all its ramifications and practical and creative manifestations.

An important educational and pedagogical point that is beginning to emerge from this discussion is that language is a powerful element of quality in education. A logical extension of this point is that the quality potentials of language-in-education cannot be fully harnessed if learning is not carried on with, in, and from language. Above everything else, this is more effectively and efficiently done (in educational terms) in the learner's first language. In the Nigerian and the African situation, that first language is, in almost all cases, an indigenous one.

The rest of this discussion will further explore this line of thinking by

- discussing the educational desirability of learning in, with, and from the first language
- looking at the prevailing situation in Africa vis à vis this educational desideratum
- highlighting and debunking well-known arguments against generalizing the use of African languages in education
- examining the concept of *incremental bilingualism* as an answer to Nigeria's and Africa's language-in-education dilemma.

The pedagogical desirability of learning from, with and in the first language

Learning from

The desirability of learning *from* the first language can be made clearer by examining the prime meaning of education, and this we would illustrate from our discussion on the subject in another context, as shown in the following quotation.

> "In the beginning was education", so say the early theorists of the discipline. This is because education exists, and has always existed in human societies, irrespective of the level of complexity of organisation of each society.
>
> Every human society has its peculiar worldview. It has a set of enduring values that are shared by all its members. This worldview and the constellation of shared values influence the patterns of relationships within the community and the organisation and conduct of human affairs. Together with climate and other geographical and environmental factors, the worldview and core values help to shape human productive, livelihood, recreational and creative activities. All of these taken together, constitute the material and non-material cultural heritage of a people.
>
> Every human society devotes a considerable amount of time and energy to transmitting its cultural heritage to its younger generation. It is this inter-generational transmission of cultural heritage that is the primary meaning and the primary function of Education.[2]

The quotation stresses three main points about the very close link between education and language.

- Every human society has a set of shared values for which language is a major conservator and propagator.
- Every human society is engaged in the trans-generational transmission of its cultural heritage.
- The veritable language for transmitting a society's cultural heritage to the next generation is the language that embodies the core values shared by that society.

These three statements also serve to illustrate that the first language is indeed humankind's first source of learning. Genuine learning has to begin with, and is anchored on, the learner's immediate environment, for the development of basic survival skills, a strong feeling of belonging, and a deep feeling of self-confidence. The learner (every learner) can be compared to someone going on a journey. We do have a common saying that such a person has to be aware of where s/he is coming from, in order to have a clear idea of where s/he is heading. Starting off a learner on a non-first language is therefore like starting a journey from its terminal point, and we can all imagine how mentally and physically taxing that would be.

In addition, education is mainly about acculturation, and to be learned is to be cultured. The accumulated wisdom embodied and embedded in the first language is the major instrument of acculturation, and a state of all-round acculturation creates in the learner a feeling of belonging. Starting off an acculturation process with a non-first language tends to exacerbate the 'far away and long ago syndrome' and does lead to a situation in which the person could become knowledgeable but not cultured, and developing a feeling of belonging to nowhere.

Learning in

The disadvantages of not learning in the first language have been well documented, and can be summed up as follows:

- learning is hampered because teaching is done in a language in which neither the teacher nor the learner has an appropriate level of mastery
- the practised curriculum differs widely from the official curriculum, as teachers constantly resort to code-switching to get linguistically and psychologically closer to learners
- linguistic failures (i.e. language problems) are mistaken for academic failure (i.e. real inability to learn), as language becomes the main barrier to learning.

Here we are more concerned with the advantages of using the first language for instruction (i.e. for teaching and learning). This is a situation in which classroom activities are carried on in the first language, the teaching-learning materials (books, audio-visuals, etc) are in the language that teacher and learners know best, and the language of the school is that of the immediate enironment.

The major advantages of such an educational environment are that

- transition from home to school is easier, since both home and school operate in the same language
- collaboration between the wider community and the school is also made easier, as there is no linguistic distance between them
- the cultural resources of the language and those of the environment are more easily harnessed to enrich teaching and learning, and education is not limited to bookish learning
- teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions in the classroom are not likely to be characterized by psychological inhibitions, and as a result, classrooms activities are most likely to be participatory
- deep learning (understanding at higher cognitive levels) is more likely to be promoted, as against mere memorization and regurgitation that characterize situations in which language constitutes a barrier to teaching and learning.

In summary, using the first language as medium of instruction is a qualitative education tool, in that it is more likely to inculcate the higher order comprehension and communication skills that are evidence of deep learning.

Learning with

We are here concerned with learning the first language - making it to serve as subject of instruction. In view of the point made earlier that education and language are intimately linked, it would be inconceivable to think of an educational situation that leaves out learning with the first language. Such an unimaginable situation, which unfortunately exists in some parts of Africa, often leads to a condition in which

- the first language runs the risk of obsolescence because it is no longer subjected to the constant evolution that all living languages go through, mainly because of their being used in active communication
- the learner begins learning basically without a linguistic foundation and a solid cultural base, as there is no opportunity to consolidate the language skills acquired in early childhood.

In other words, learning with the first language has the advantage of facilitating learning, of ensuring a sound cultural base for the learner, and of keeping the first language alive, and therefore continuously growing, like all living languages.

An important point that has emerged from the discussion so far is that the quality dimensions of the use of the First Language in education can best be promoted when learning is in, with, and from the language. Learning with the first language reinforces the language skills acquired in early childhood. Learning in it helps to ensure genuine learning by developing the higher cognitive and communication skills, while learning from it promotes the feeling of belonging and self-confidence that goes with all-round acculturation.

The prevailing language-in-education situation in Africa

For enhanced clarity of presentation, the discussion in this section will be done under three sub-headings:

- the overall language situation in Africa
- existing patterns of Language-in-education policies and practices
- the consequences of failure to adopt educationally appropriate policies, or the timid pursuit of existing policies.

Africa's overall language situation

Africa's language topography has been described as being in the form of a pyramid[3],as illustrated in Figure 1.
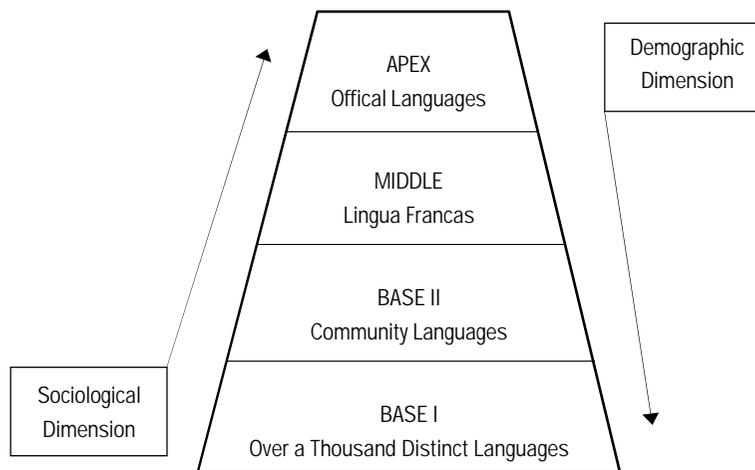

Fig. 1: Africa's Language Pyramid

The following features characterize Africa's rich language repertoire that forms the pyramid in question.

- At the base we have some 1,000 to 1,500 distinct languages.
- Some of these have grown to become community languages, spoken outside their original geographical boundaries (see Highlight Box 1 for Nigeria's community languages).
- A number of the community languages have grown further to become lingua francas, used by millions of speakers, with rich literature (E.g. Hausa, Kiswhahili, Lingala, Nigerian and Cameroonian Pidgin, etc.).
- At the apex are the 'official languages', inherited from colonization and other forms of contact - Arabic, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese.
- The social dimension of the pyramid is one in which the languages at the apex have a higher social status than those at the base.
- On the demographic side, a large majority of African languages lie at the base of the pyramid.
- This situation has given rise to a state of linguistic inequity, which we have described in an earlier work[4] in the following words:

> ... The apex-level official languages enjoy a prestige that has nothing to do with their demographic, socio-linguistic, or psycho-linguistic importance in African societies. Thus, millions of Africans who have not been to school are proficient only in their first languages. These 'uneducated' persons are often the creators of the music, dance, theater, and the fantastic wealth of oral traditions that have enlivened African societies for generations. They are the ones who can readily distinguish between twenty different species of the white yam, who can tell the level of fertility of soil by merely smelling it, who can readily process leaves, herbs, roots, and tubers into food and medicines. They are also the ones to whom modern scholars (anthropologists, linguists, historians, musicologists, etc.) turn to enlighten their 'scholarly' works.

Abua, Anang, Angas, Beroun, Bura, Chamba, Daka, Duka, Ebira, Edo, Efik, Ekpoye, Esan, Fulfude, Gwari, Hausa, Ibibio, Idoma, Igala, Igbo, Igede, Izon, Isoko, Kalabari, Kamuku, Kamwe, Kanuri, Lela, Mumuye, Nupe, Pidgin, Reshe, Tiv, Urhobo, Yerkee, Yoruba, Zarma

Highlight Box 1: Nigeria's Community Languages[5]

Patterns of language-in-education policies and practices

Language-in education policies and practices in Africa have been influenced by a combination of the following factors[6]:

- *The colonial experience:* Countries colonized by Spain, France, Portugal, and Belgium did teaching in the colonial language from the first day in school, while those colonized by Great Britain and Germany promoted the use of various first languages for instruction during the early years of schooling.

- *The nature of political evolution and educational reforms after independence:* The urge to evolve national systems of education (including the promotion of indigenous languages in education) was high on the continental agenda in the 1960s. Language-in-education policies responding to linguistic landscape realities and some bold steps followed (Guinea, Tanzania, etc.), but there has been some 'stalling' since the early 1990s.

- *The socio-linguistic contours of each country*: In most cases, it has been easier for monolingual countries (Somalia, Madagascar, Lesotho) to promote the only language that everyone speaks in education, but, in most cases, this has not gone beyond the first years of formal education, because of the strong push exerted by the official languages at the apex of the national language pyramid.

- *The strength of the education and language interest lobbies in each country*: Some countries were able, in the years following the attainment of independence, to consolidate on the work done by missionaries on indigenous languages by training a corps of applied linguists, by developing professional associations of teachers of and researchers in indigenous languages, by undertaken orthography reforms and the development of educational materials and creative works in national languages, and more importantly, by establishing centers of training and research in national languages at the tertiary level. The impact of these efforts on the educational system has varied from country to country, but (almost in all cases) there has been a wide gap between the zeal of intentions and the sloth of implementation.

These factors have combined to produce the following patterns of practice and policy of learning in, with and from the first language.

- The first language as medium of instruction in the early years, but as a subject in subsequent years (most of the Anglophone countries).

- The first language as language of learning at the basic cycle of education (Tanzania, Madagascar, Rwanda, Somalia, Burundi).

- The first language in the junior primary school, but the national (indigenous) language – Amharic – up to the end of secondary education (Ethiopia).

- The first language as a subject in primary education, but not a medium of instruction (a large number of Francophone countries).

- Bilingual education (using the first language in combination with the official language from day one, and using the first language to facilitate the acquisition of French): Mali's "convergent pedagogy".

- The first language not featuring at all in formal education, except in a few experimental projects (Côte D'Ivoire).

There is, almost in all cases in which the first language is promoted in education, a wide gulf between policy pronouncements and the prescriptions that go with them and the practices in the school system. In nearly all cases, policy implementation has to combat hostile attitudes from two ends of the social spectrum.

At one end of the spectrum are the ordinary citizens, who cannot see the use of literacy and basic education in the first language in situations in which such a language is not that of government business, and in situations in which social mobility is facilitated mainly by a mastery of the official language.

The situation is not helped by what is known to happen at the other end (the elite class end) of the spectrum. Here, even education policy makers, who are members of this class, often educate their children in private schools that give a head start in the mastery of the official language.

Impact of the prevailing situation on quality of education

The prevailing language in education situation creates multiple disadvantages for the African child, as well as for Africa's entire education system. It reduces the chances of African children having quality education. This unhealthy phenomenon is manifested in a number of ways.[7]

First, curriculum development in the first language has not benefited from the abundant societal resources needed to ensure all-round socialization of the learner. The materials are still largely books, often patterned after course books in the official language with their rigid reading and grammar and vocabulary drills.

Second, in a good number of cases, as illustrated by our own studies in the 1970s, the official injunctions to use English exclusively for instruction in the upper primary school is not often fully respected, as both teachers and learners have problems communicating in that language, and are therefore forced to juggle between the first and the official languages in the course of their lessons.

As Figure 2 shows, the revision phase (involving a quick recall of the main points of the previous lesson) is carried out mainly in English. The

same is true of the introduction of the day's lesson. However, the development phase, during which intensive teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction is expected, is carried out predominantly in the language in which everyone feels at home, the first language. The revision phase (checking to see that the lesson has been understood) is again a predominantly first language affair, while the final phase (giving assignments preparatory to the next lesson) is an activity that is shared 50:50 between the first language and English.[8]

Phase of Lesson	English	First Language
Revision	80	20
Introduction	75	25
Development	15	85
Revision	30	70
Assignment	50	50
Average	50	50

Fig. 2: Teachers' Estimates of Use of English and the First Language for Classroom Interactions in the Upper Primary School

From the teachers' self-report summarized in Figure 2, which of the two languages dominates classroom interaction in a situation in which English must be the language of instruction? It is certainly the first language, as the development phase of a typical lesson usually takes up the bulk of the official 40-minute teaching period.

Third, the prevailing situation has resulted in a linguistic dilemma, a situation in which the learner (at least at the end of the basic education cycle) is proficient neither in the first language nor in the official language. The learner's linguistic failure has also given rise to academic failure. Even in cases in which official examinations have been passed, learning has been mainly by rote. Deep learning has not taken place, and consequently there can be no qualitative improvements in learner behaviour. Worse still, learning becomes not a pleasure but drudgery. The habit of learning how to learn that the knowledge economy demands thus becomes difficult to inculcate. These are the challenges that the Ife Six-Year Primary Project (initiated by our distinguished guest of honour, Prof. Fafunwa) attempted to address. (See Highlight Box 2)

OBJECTIVE: Enhancing the quality of learning achievement and bilingual language competence at the primary level, by

- laying a solid foundation in both English and Yoruba
- teaching in, with, and from the first language all through the primary education cycle

DESIGN

- Experimental groups of students taught all school subjects (with the exception of English) in Yoruba, with English as a subject, taught by specially trained teachers
- Controlled groups of comparative levels, and in comparable situations taught by orthodox methods - English as medium of instruction and Yoruba as a subject

RELATED ACTIVITIES

- Teacher preparation
- Development of Yoruba technical/scientific terms and metalanguage
- Curriculum materials development

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Significantly higher academic performance by learners taught in the first language
- Significantly higher levels of bilingual language performance by the same group of learners
- Easy adaptation to English medium requirements at the secondary level

UNINTENDED POSITIVE OUTCOMES

- Capacity building for curriculum development, teacher in-service education, and research
- Contribution to enriching the Yoruba language

Highlight Box 2: The Ife Six-Year Primary Project

Fourth, teaching and learning in a non-first language has the effect of creating teacher-dominated classrooms, where 'talking and chalking' replaces genuine teaching and learning. An offshoot of the Ife Six-Year Project research by Juliet Macauley aptly illustrates this point[9].

The study involved the same teachers teaching the first five of ten units of instruction in social studies in one language to a fifth year primary class and then shifting to the next language for instruction in the second half of the unit. Table 2 shows the extent to which teaching behaviour is influenced by the language used by the teacher, while Table 3 illustrates the extent to which the language used for instruction influences learner classroom participation.

Of the 12 teacher behaviour categories in Table 2, the teacher operating in English outscores the one teaching in the first language on the following, which are either routine events or behaviour, that impact negatively on learning:

*   giving directions (item 1)
*   asking questions on the previous lesson (item 2)
*   giving information (item3)
*   correcting errors of language (item 8)
*   scolding the learner (item 9)
*   repeating set phrases (item 10)
*   observing moments of inactivity (item 11).

Teaching/Learning Behaviour Category	Experimental Group	Control Group
The teacher ...		
1. Gives directions	1.50	2.25
2. Asks questions on previous lesson	4.75	10.13
3. Gives information	21.63	35.75
4. Expands information with additional examples	14.38	13.75
5. Supports activities with proverbs and songs	10.75	1.00
6. Demonstrates	4.13	3.00
7. Gives inter relationships	6.13	3.88
8. Corrects language errors	0.00	2.75
9. Scolds	0.05	2.00
10. Repeats set phrases	0.00	2.63
11. Marked moments of inactivity in class work	1.13	2.75
12. Pupils summarizing lesson	3.00	2.63

Table 2: Language of Instruction and Teacher Classroom Behaviour

On the other hand, the teacher operating in the first language has significantly higher scores on the following items, which are all teaching behaviours that impact positively on learning:

*   expanding information with additional examples (item 4)
*   enriching activities with proverbs and songs (item 5)
*   demonstrations (item 6)
*   giving inter-relationships (item 7).

It is worthy of note that the teacher operating in the first language scores 0.00, or very close to it, on

*   correcting language errors (the implication here being that language error correcting consumes a good amount of teaching-learning time and efforts when classroom interactions are carried out in a non-first language, while language errors are practically not a problem when teaching-learning transactions are carried out in the first language)
*   scolding learners
*   repeating set phrases.

What is most striking here is that the teacher who exhibits negative teaching behaviours while operating in English turns around to exhibit positive behaviours when there is a switch from English to the first language as medium of classroom interaction.

Turning to Table 3, we find striking differences in level and type of learner classroom participation in classroom activities between pupils taught in the first language and those taught in English. Pupils learning in English show superiority in the following items:

*   items 1 and 2 (nonverbal responses and mono-syllabic responses to stimuli from the teacher, respectively) – two items that are evidence of learner passivity
*   item 8 (incorrect use of language) – a confirmation of the non-first language being a strong barrier to learner participation in classroom activities.

On the other hand, the pupils taught in the first language are superior in the items that show full learner participation and a more participatory teaching-learning process:

*   giving CONVERSATIONAL responses to the Teacher (item 2)
*   giving FULL SENTENCE responses (item 4)
*   volunteering extra information (item 5)
*   relating lesson to their daily experiences (item 6)
*   arguing for further clarifications (item 7)

- initiating activities (item 9)
- disagreeing with the teacher (item 10)
- engaging the teacher in discussions (item 11)
- engaging in group activities (item 12).

Teaching/Learning Category	Experimental Group	Control Group
1. Non-verbal responses	2.63	5.63
2. Conversational responses to teacher's questions	10.63	3.13
3. Monosyllabic responses	0.88	3.89
4. Full sentence responses	8.63	4.80
5. Learners volunteering information	6.63	2.00
6. Pupils relating aspects of lesson to their daily experience	5.25	1.24
7. Pupils arguing for further clarifications	4.13	0.00
8. Incorrect use of language	0.00	3.63
9. Pupils initiating activities	3.75	0.88
10. Pupils disagreeing with teacher	1.26	0.00
11. Discussions between teacher and pupils	7.13	0.75
12. Group activity	7.00	3.88

Table 3: Language of Instruction and Learner Participation

The study under reference also compared gains in performance (as measured by scores in pre- and post achievement tests) and found

- no significant differences in scores on lower order cognitive skills (e.g. memory),
- pupils who learnt in the first language had significantly higher gains on items measuring subject mastery at the higher cognitive levels (e.g. analysis).

Finally, we would like to draw attention to yet another important point of high pedagogic interest arising from the study. Teacher educators have always characterized the perfect teacher as one who is able to minimize teacher talk and maximize learner participation. Approximating that perfect teacher has not been easy in the African school setting. The study under reference, however, seems to indicate that this would be possible in situations in which learning is done in, with, and from the first language.

Arguments against the generalisation of the use of the first language in education in the African setting

The tone of the discussion so far has been that the first language is the ideal tool for laying a solid foundation for quality education. We are, however, not unmindful of strong counter arguments from well-meaning Africans. This section will summarize these counter arguments and place them side by side with refutations.

- **Counter-Argument 1**: There are just too many languages struggling for attention in any given African country, so the choice of the first language (s) to use in education is almost impossible.
- **Refutation 1:** The choice is perhaps difficult, but it is certainly not impossible. The demographic and socio-linguistic strength of specific languages can in fact be determined with some accuracy. This has been used in a number of countries to determine 'zonal' languages for use in education (Guinea: 6 languages; Zambia: 6 languages; D R Congo: 4 languages; Namibia: 4 languages, etc).
- **Counter-Argument 2:** Large cities pose a peculiar problem, as the population will contain substantial numbers of persons of diverse linguistic origins.
- **Refutation 2:** In most of the large cities of Africa there is usually a dominant language, the language of the market place, of the roadside workshop, of the play field, etc. Yoruba in Lagos, Wolof in Dakar, Soussou in Conakry, Ewe in Lomé, Lingala in Kinshasa, Kiswahili in Nairobi, Hausa in Kano, Igbo in Onitsha, etc. Such a language is usually learnt informally by a majority of citizens and it is usually the best-mastered language of second and older generations of immigrants. Learning in, with, and from it is therefore possible.
- **Counter-Argument 3:** There are too many African languages without a written form, and this makes their use in education impossible.
- **Refutation 3:** First language learning need not begin with reading and writing, as the natural sequence for language acquisition is oracy before literacy. Moreover, the scientific capacity for developing orthographies is readily available in Africa. As Table 4 shows, Africa already has an appreciably large number of written languages. There are even cases of 'common orthographies' (applicable to several closely related languages) developed by African linguists for highly multilingual countries like Cameroon.

Country	No. of Written Languages	Country	No. of Written Languages
Benin	7	Kenya	7
Burkina Faso	12	Liberia	4
Cameroon	38	Mali	9
Central African Republic	4	Niger	5
Chad	4	Nigeria	22
Cote d'Ivoire	19	Senegal	6
D R Congo	7	Sierra Leone	6
Ethiopia	11	South Africa	8
Ghana	17	Uganda	3
Guinea	6	Zambia	7

Table 4: A Selection of Africa's Written Languages[10]

- **Counter-Argument 4:** The cost of training teachers and producing materials in a multiplicity of first languages would be prohibitive, especially in a situation of severe poor funding of education.
- **Refutation 4:** Materials are not necessarily books, as there are societal resources (artifacts, dance, music, drama, festivals) that are more effective materials than books. Teachers would no doubt need to be trained, especially in creativity, to be able to harness the learning potential of societal resources. Moreover, the emphasis in Africa must shift to investing in education (seeing the benefits of education in their long-term, multi-impact perspectives) rather than merely spending on education. Addressing quality issues in education involves some sustained investment.

- **Counter-Argument 5:** An overemphasis on learning in the first language would be detrimental to student mastery of the official languages that hold the key to higher education and social mobility.
- **Refutation 5:** A solid foundation in the first language does in fact facilitate the learning of the official language, since bilingualism in a solid manner does aid further language learning. Furthermore, the psycho-educational benefits of initial learning in the first language cannot be matched by the prevailing patchwork approach that makes the learner a master of no language at all.

- **Counter-Argument 6:** African languages do not possess the scientific and technical terms needed for understanding today's complex world. It would therefore be a handicap for learners to concentrate too heavily on their first language.
- **Refutation 6:** All human languages are capable of coping with their immediate realities and can easily expand their repertoire to absorb new experiences. African languages have proved over the years that they can do this and have done so through digging deep into their internal linguistic resources, by borrowing and adapting from other languages, and by coinages. (See Highlight Box 3)

"Using a language in education is one way of ensuring its technical development. As orthography is developed to meet the needs of literacy, appropriate terms emerge to cope with teaching-learning needs in a variety of formal disciplines. Literacy (well developed) can lead to the emergence of literature in a particular language. With a large corps of users (created by the educational system) societal use of the language can be further enhanced.

That certain concepts can be too abstract to be expressed in African languages is not supported by empirical evidence. The Christian concept of the Holy Trinity, for, example, came into over a hundred African languages over a century ago (with the Bible translated into numerous languages) and through the work of missionaries. For African groups that have always had their strong religious beliefs and cosmology, the 'transfer' to Christian beliefs did not prove impossible.

Problems related to the level of technical development of individual languages will have to be addressed in a creative manner, through borrowing, adaptations, and harnessing of the cultural resources and deeper syntactico-lexical wealth of each language".[11]
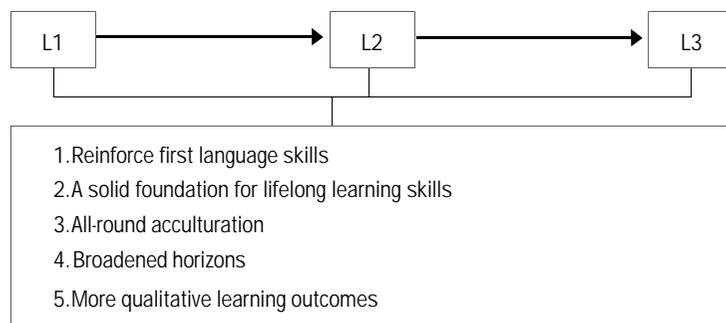
Highlight Box 3: Enhancing the Technical Capacity of Languages through their use in Education

Incremental bilingualism as a viable policy option

The concept

Incremental bilingualism refers to a process of progressive bi-multilingual development that ensures a proper consolidation of the first language in the early years of life and in basic education. The acquisition of further languages (through the educational system) is considered as a further build up to the deep language structures already acquired in the first language. Further language acquisition would not lead to the loss of competence and performance in any of the basic skills of the first language.

As Fig. 3 shows, the goals of incremental bilingualism are to reinforce the skills of the first language, lay a solid foundation for learning-to-learn skills right from the early years of life, to provide the opportunity for building a positive self concept through all-round acculturation, and to open up wider horizons into a globalized world through an appropriate level of mastery of the official language, and above all, improved learning outcomes.

L1 ⟶ L2 ⟶ L3

1. Reinforce first language skills
2. A solid foundation for lifelong learning skills
3. All-round acculturation
4. Broadened horizons
5. More qualitative learning outcomes

L1 = First language   L2 = Second language   L3 = Further languages

Fig 3: Process and Benefits of Incremental Bilingualism

The opposite of incremental bilingualism would be diminishing bilingualism, which, as the thin arrows in Fig. 4 try to illustrate, is predicated on a poor mastery of the first language before an attempt is made to acquire the official language. Consequently, the learner ends up as a master of no language. The other consequences would be a negative self-concept in the learner and that quality learning cannot take place.
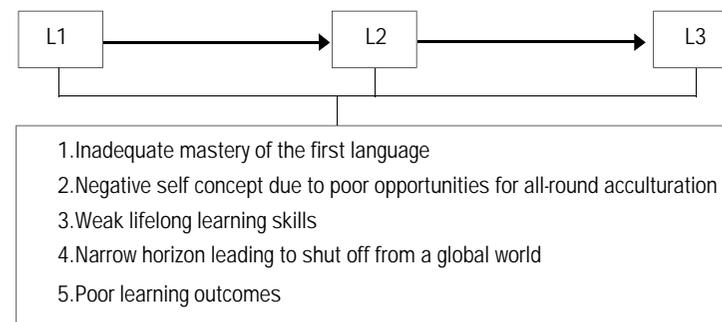
L1 ⟶ L2 ⟶ L3

1. Inadequate mastery of the first language
2. Negative self concept due to poor opportunities for all-round acculturation
3. Weak lifelong learning skills
4. Narrow horizon leading to shut off from a global world
5. Poor learning outcomes

Fig. 4: Diminishing Bilingualism and Its Possible Effects

Some concrete examples

Four African countries are known to have adopted the policy of incremental bilingualism in their education systems. It is interesting to note that this has been done, both for the purpose of political engineering and within the context of the EFA (Education For All) action plans for these countries.

Ethiopia, after its civil war in the mid 1990s, accorded each nationality in the country full constitutional recognition of its language and the right to lay the foundations of education and learning in all nationality languages. The post-war constitution also recognizes Amharic as the lingua franca and official language of the country. Every nationality language is used (in its geographical and political coverage area) for instruction throughout the six years of primary education. Amharic is taught as a subject at this level, and it becomes the language of instruction at the junior and senior primary levels. English is a compulsory subject at the senior secondary level and it is the language of instruction only in post secondary institutions. The nationality languages remain compulsory subjects on the school curriculum up till the end of secondary education.

Morocco and Algeria have substantial non-Arabic speaking populations. These groups have been agitating for political autonomy for decades. In the two countries, political autonomy has also meant the right to develop and use the indigenous languages of the minority nationalities, and both the constitution and the educational policies of these countries have institutionalized this right. The right has consequently translated into incremental bilingualism for Berber-speaking children, who can now learn solely in Berber in primary school, acquire Arabic at the primary level, but use it as medium of instruction only at the senior secondary level.

In **South Africa**, the post-apartheid constitution recognizes eleven official languages[12] (including South African Sign Language as 12th official

language for purposes of education) for the conduct of government business. The language-in-education policy favours additive bi-multilingualism and allows schools to choose any of the official languages to be used as media of instruction throughout schooling. This represents a paradigmatic break with apartheid. In practice, however, the economic power of English, the anglocentric mindset of the middle classes and the pugnacious efforts of Afrikaans-speakers mean that only English and Afrikaans are used for this purpose up to Grade 12, as was the case under apartheid. The other 9 official (indigenous) languages are used as media of instruction for merely the first three years of schooling, before the calamitous transition to English medium. In most cases, the first language will be a compulsory subject in basic and secondary education. Speakers of all languages other than English will learn it as a subject early in school. Thus the incremental bi-multilingual intention of the policy has yet to be realized in practice.

An integrated, all-embracing process

One can notice a number of conditionalities governing the process of institutionalizing incremental bilingualism into the educational system. There is usually a coordinated chain of actions at the political and technical levels.

First, language rights are recognized as a fundamental human right in the country's constitution. Second, a national language policy is developed to espouse in greater detail the language rights provisions of the nation's constitution. Third, appropriate mechanisms are set up (and empowered) for systematic language planning and development. Fourth, the national education policy takes a cue from the constitution and the language policy and makes adequate provisions for language education in the broader context of incremental bilingualism. Fifth, the educational service delivery mechanisms take care of teacher education, materials development, research and evaluation and social mobilization to ensure smooth implementation. Above all, like all development programmes, incremental bilingualism through the educational system must be adequately budgeted for.

Conclusions

The central message of this discussion is that learning in, with, and from the first language is a major issue to be addressed in our education reform efforts in Nigeria and in most of Africa. This message is supported, first and foremost, by the strictly educational value of the first language - it being the tool 'par excellence' for inter-generational transmission of cultural heritage. It is also supported by the human rights and linguistic values of preventing the endangerment of Africa's indigenous languages - a phenomenon that will arise if these languages are not used, are not further developed through education, and therefore not allowed to grow in the way all living languages do.

Another important support for our central message is the close relationship between laying the foundation of learning in the language of the learner's immediate environment, and the language in which the learner feels most at home, and the quality of the education that the learner gets. As some of the supporting evidence to our central message shows, struggling to learn in a non-first language (when the learner is still a master of no language at all) turns the act of learning into drudgery, instead of its being a pleasure. This in its turn impedes the development of lifelong learning skills, which is a major curriculum requirement of the global move towards quality basic education for all.

In fact, the globalized world of the present millenium, and the knowledge economy that it has brought in its trail, require a critical mass of persons who can think, communicate, and who have a highly developed aptitude for creativity. The global move towards quality basic education for all is intended to reduce the chances of some countries missing the opportunities offered by the emerging knowledge-propelled world. The global EFA movement actually recommends that a solid foundation for this be laid at the basic education level (the foundation stone for all future learning) in the first language. This same point is emphasized in the AU Charter on African Languages, which stresses the need to treat language development and the development of African languages for use in education as an integral part of national development efforts.

There can certainly be counter-messages to our central message. It can be argued, for example, that Nigeria and Africa have produced brilliant and world-class persons who went straight for English, French or Portuguese from their first day in school. What that argument has not taken into consideration is the large number of our people who have also failed to become world class, or any class at all, because learning in a non-first language (with the drudgery it entails) compelled them to substitute certificates and diplomas for education, and who therefore prematurely stopped learning.

It can also be countered that what we all need is proficiency in English, as this is the language of modern day business, science, and Information and Communications Technology. But, is the current trend towards diminishing bilingualism likely to produce proficient users of English from our midst? Are employers not already complaining of the standard of English among the graduates of our higher institutions?

It will be pertinent to recall, in response to possible counter-messages, that the Japanese language (the medium of education in Japan) is spoken only in Japan, that China has as yet no overseas territories, that India conducts basic and secondary education in its numerous first languages. What these countries have in common is that they have become nations to be reckoned with in today's technological and industrial world. Their technological leapfrogging is supported largely by their national educational systems. These systems have successfully used incremental bilingualism to promote mass education, to produce the creative brainpower to support industrial and technological growth, and to produce a corps of highly educated citizens who can do business in English with the western world, in addition to being deeply rooted in their national cultures.

Finally, to return to where we started, we are advocating education with the first language (that is, learning it). This should go along with learning in the first language (that is, using it to explore the social and physical world around us), as well as learning from it (that is, harnessing its cumulative, age-long wisdom for our intellectual-social-physical enrichment). This is the first step in lifelong learning. It is the foundation for the incremental bilingualism that would ensure our pride in being Africans, in addition to making us competitive citizens of a wider world.

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10. Source: UNESCO/BREDA (1985). The situation would have changed over the years, with more languages reduced to writing.
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