

Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project

**POLICY DIALOGUE AND CLASSROOM-BASED RESEARCH
ON GHANA'S SCHOOL LANGUAGE POLICY**

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INTRODUCTION

As it would be clear by now, since the early 1970s, it has been the official policy that the medium of instruction (MoI) from primary class one to class three should be the prevalent language of the area in which the school is situated. From class four onwards English should serve as the MoI and the prevalent Ghanaian language should be taught as a subject. The need to use local languages in the educational system goes back a long way. The Phelps-Stokes Commission of 1922 stressed the importance of local languages in the educational system and the British Advisory Committee on Native Education in Tropical Africa recommended in 1927 that local languages should serve as the MoI for the early years of primary education. Recommendations favouring the use of the local languages have not always found favour with all stakeholders. The current policy has been fraught with real and perceived difficulties and has therefore not always been adhered to. The dynamics of community and classroom contexts shed some light on the problems confronting implementation.

THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION

Ghana, perhaps unlike Malawi, is a highly multi-lingual and multi-ethnic country with up to 70 indigenous languages spoken within her borders. Though most of the languages are by linguistic affiliation and classification either Kwa and Gur, even languages that belong to the same family may not be mutually intelligible and speakers of closely related languages may not understand each other fully unless they have developed bilingual skills in the respective languages. The languages also vary in size; while the Akan dialects account for several million speakers some languages have less than ten thousand speakers. Government does not attach equal importance to the development of the languages; while several are being sponsored, the majority do not enjoy official sponsorship. The linguistic fragmentation of Ghana introduces complexities and complications for policy implementation and pedagogy.

THE IDEAL SCENARIO

It would seem that if the current policy is to be fully implemented, most of the 70 languages would have to be developed and made to serve the educational needs of children in all parts of the country. To do this would have financial and educational implications and a cost benefit analysis would need to be undertaken.

- Efficient and effective writing systems for each language will be necessary
- Mother tongue or first language (L1) speakers will have to be trained to be able to teach the languages and use them as media of instruction
- Textbooks and exciting reading materials will have to be made available in these languages.
- Registers or meta-languages will be necessary for the various content subjects e.g. mathematics.

In addition to the financial and logistic constraints of doing all the above, there is also the perceived political question of encouraging ethnic division and particularisms within the nation state since language is an important marker of identity. It may be that this fear, among other things, led to government's insistence on an English medium in the years immediately after Independence.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

The Universities and academic institutions are teaching and researching on the major languages. The Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT) has since the mid-1960s been researching into some of the lesser known languages and it has to its credit grammars, phonological accounts and basic literacy materials in a number of Ghanaian languages. Government itself now sponsors 10 or so languages through the Bureau of Ghana Languages (BGL) which has since its inception in 1951 been mandated to produce basic educational materials such as primers and follow-up readers in the selected languages (see Otoo 1969). The Non-formal or extra-mural division of the Ministry of Education (MoE) produces literacy materials in the same local languages for adult literacy. In recent years, the GTZ, a German development partnership organization has initiated textbook production schemes in a few major languages.

The question of orthography or standardized and approved writing systems still bedevils most GhLs. For any language several dialects can be expected and sometimes speakers cannot agree on which of these should become the standard. If no consensus exists on how to write a language, it becomes difficult to see how books can be produced and that language taught effectively in schools.

CURRENT REALITIES

MINIMAL BILINGUALISM IN THE CLASSROOM

In the majority of the sites there was a tendency for teachers of lower primary classes to use English most of the time and to resort to the use of the local medium where children did not seem to have grasped a point being made in English. Our records contain mixed Kasem-English utterances such as the following in class two during a mathematics lesson:

Teacher: Two times four. Two *Kuni begera?* [two times what?]; Two *Kuni bena.* [Two times four]

Teacher: Two times four. Who can give me the answer?

Teacher: Monica! *Nmo diim tu sukuuli na?* [Did you come to school yesterday?]

In a school at a different site we recorded the following encounters that combined Twi-English at a class two mathematics lesson.

Teacher: "Use it to make any form *biribiara, wo de eight no rebeye biribi te se shape wo wo table no so ama ma hwe.*"

[Use the eight match sticks to make any shape on your tables that you fancy for me to inspect]

In a religious lesson for the same class we find the following mixture of Twi-English :

- Teacher: Speak loudly! Good. Jonah told the people to throw him into the sea. *Jonah ka kyeree nkrofoo no se wonto no ntwene epo no mu.* So, when they threw him into the sea, what happened to him? What was in the sea? Yes!
- Pupil: Shark. Shark.

In many situations where the medium is English the teacher does all the talking and the pupils only advance monosyllabic responses, including attention catchers such as, sir! or madam !or yes, madam ! or one word answers such as four, three, etc. in mathematics lessons or hand clapping, rehearsed choral repetitions etc. So monotonous does this get, in one case, a teacher gently chides pupils in the following: “*Don't be calling me Madam, otherwise my name will finish*” while at another school the teacher tells the class: “*I have told you I don't want the word 'Please Madam'. Sit down and raise up your hand. Hawa, sit up.*”

TEXTBOOK PRODUCTION

It is clear from observations at the six schools studied that Ghanaian language textbooks are non-existent. At most sites what passes for a textbook is a translation of the *Path to Knowledge* book series into selected languages. This book however, is best described as a supplementary reader, one that was published in the 1970s. Given the differences between languages and cultures, the fact that culture is itself dynamic and not static, and also taking into account the differences in skills and expertise between the various translators of the book, it is doubtful how relevant a translated item such as the *Path to Knowledge* text is for the present day primary school pupil. Paradoxically, not enough copies of the book are currently available in all the study schools.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF APPROPRIATE EXPRESSIONS FOR TEACHING CONTENT SUBJECTS

Just as there are no textbooks in the Ghanaian languages, textbooks for content subjects are in English rather than in the Ghanaian languages. If textbooks for content subjects (e.g. mathematics, environmental studies, religious and moral education) existed in the local languages, the tasks of the teacher using these languages as MoI would be simplified and made easier. As it is, individual teachers have to search for ways of expressing concepts like *mathematical sets*, the various shapes such as *rectangles, squares, trapeziums* or *angles* and *fractions* etc in the local languages. While some teachers may have no difficulty conveying the meaning of *negative* and *positive* numbers in the local languages it cannot be assumed that all teachers would be equally capable. It cannot be doubted that for a class two pupil who is being taught mathematics in the local language fractions can be mystifying when the English terms are introduced without adequate preparation.

There would be the need to develop what linguists call registers or patterns of expression suitable for particular subjects of discourse. Local languages often lack the technical vocabularies and expressions

for peculiar concepts¹. There is need for coinage and standardisation of expressions to facilitate comprehension. For example, teaching religious and moral education in the local languages is much easier than teaching some technical subjects in the same medium because teachers and pupils hear religious services conducted in the local languages and expressions have become somewhat standardized over time. Kasena culture may lack a concept of *angel* and *devil* and there may not exist local terms that can translate *angel* but there is today no difficulty about how to render this concept. The Semitic term *malika* has gained acceptance now due to standardisation through repeated use in religious discourse. Some teachers' unwillingness to teach the content subjects in the medium of the local language is due, in no small degree, to the lack of ready expressions for key concepts.

THE TEACHER'S COMPETENCE AND WILLINGNESS TO USE LOCAL LANGUAGES AS MOI

Many teachers are unwilling to teach in the local languages (GhL) or teach them as subjects or do so reluctantly and under protest. In one site, teachers felt that the teaching of GhLs was not a priority. They regarded them as the least important on the timetable and often slot them for the end of day hours. The reasons may be several.

- Some teachers do not understand the prevalent local languages sufficiently, or have not been taught how to use the local languages as a medium of instruction.
- Some teachers are not fully conversant with the official language policy
- Some teachers do not appreciate the pedagogical importance of using the first language as MoI
- All the textbooks and manuals for content subjects are in English. For the textbook-dependent teacher, it would be easier to use English, the medium of the textbook, although the pedagogical rewards could be less satisfying.

Most teachers who left the college before 1976 are unlikely to have received any instruction in Ghanaian language teaching since hitherto these languages had not been on the timetables of Government colleges. In-service training would appear to be vital for these teachers. It was found that in-service training was rare in the schools and that Ghanaian languages suffered most in this respect. All teachers interviewed expressed the desire to have in-service courses conducted periodically for them in all subjects including the Ghanaian languages.

Researchers observed the following paradoxes in some sites:

¹ This is not to imply the inferiority of these languages; it is axiomatic that all human languages are self-sufficient.

Paradox 1 (Teacher trained in a GhL she did not speak fluently)

In one site, the only teacher in the lower primary who was trained in the local training college did not speak the local language and those teachers who were first language speakers did not train in the local training college.

Paradox 2 (Grade 1 teacher not fluent in the Local GhL)

In another school, the teacher who understood the local language least handled the beginner class, the class with the least exposure to English.

Paradox 3 (Trained teachers who are L1 speakers say they cannot teach the L1)

In School 3, trained teachers who were first language speakers of the local language said they did not specialize in the language. Therefore it became the duty of another teacher on the staff to take the classes in the local language and since there were several classes to deal with, the effectiveness of this teacher was anybody's guess.

It is not clear whether it is by accident or by design that less experienced teachers tended to be posted to the lower classes. While the MoE policy is to post primary school teachers to areas where they are conversant with the local languages, this remains an ideal rather than the norm.

When community representatives were asked what they would do if a teacher who did not speak the local language was posted to the school, invariably they replied that they would appeal to the Headteacher or petition the education office to replace such a teacher. The communities seem therefore to appreciate that they have a responsibility to ensure that L1 speakers or teachers fluent in the local language are posted to the school; however, there was no evidence that communities were assertive on this issue. In the rural areas, traditionally communities lack a voice in policy matters.

COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TO THE USE OF LOCAL LANGUAGES AS MOI

Community attitudes on the GhLs and their role as MoI are mixed. While the majority of parents preferred their children to be taught in English, there were some parents who said a bilingual medium was appropriate. Very few however, opted for a GhL as sole MoI. Some of those who opted for an

English medium also accepted that a form of bilingualism involving English and the local language would facilitate learning in the case of first graders.

Our research encountered in one community, where another Ghanaian language other than the local language was approved for school use, suggestions for a tri-lingual medium involving the local language, the predominant Ghanaian language and English. Parents were sometimes concerned that their children might not cope in another Ghanaian language that is not their first language. This fear, perhaps less justified, seems widespread in some multi-lingual settings.

The example of the English medium schools which seem to be dear to the hearts of urban dwellers seem to influence in no small way the preference for an English medium in the rural areas. We cannot deny that even in high places there still lingers the perception that use of a GhL medium is a step in retrogression for the educational system (see the Hawkes 1977:58 comment on 'strong "pro-English" forces influencing Government'). Some rural parents have come to admire the Television (TV) image of the urbanite six year old who rattles English on TV. The 'Experimental School' and the 'International School' still remain the average Ghanaian parent's ideal school and some parents have expressed fears that their own rural children, less articulate in English, might be uncompetitive in this uncompromisingly competitive world. Interestingly, students in one training college have expressed the same fears. It is consoling however, that when the purpose of the Ghanaian language medium policy was explained to parents many changed their stance and extolled the virtues of local language medium.

PUPILS ATTITUDES

The negative community attitude to GHLS has inevitably influenced pupils disposition to the learning of these languages. When asked for their preferred MoI, many pupils preferred English but some also made it clear that they did not always understand the teacher when English was the MoI. Lack of comprehension certainly impacts on the quality of pupils' participation in lessons. In one school, teacher conducted a lesson in English but the children responded in the local language. While the teacher did not object overly to this, she nevertheless encouraged such pupils to say their answers in English.

- Teacher: Good!, God sent Jonah. He sent him to go to which town? Yes!
Pupil: Ninive
Teacher: Good! God sent Jonas to go to Ninive. And what did he say in his heart? He said what? Yes?
Pupil: *Menko*
Teacher: Good. *Menko*. English? *Menko*. Yes? He didn't go and he said ...?

TEACHER TRAINING

Since the early 1970s government realised that if the official language policy was to succeed, teachers would have to be trained. Accordingly, government established a specialist college to train Ghanaian language tutors in several languages². Additionally, the teacher training colleges were mandated to equip trainee teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to teach the various GhLs and use them as MoI at the lower primary school. For this purpose, each college was expected to admit only students who would benefit from the study of any of the selected and approved languages predominant in the catchment area. A proper assessment of the teacher training programmes is yet to be carried out, to my knowledge, but it would appear that if any success has been achieved it must be a qualified one.

- For some reason or the other some of the specialist language tutors have preferred the comfort of the office to the classroom.
- Individual training colleges have not been able to find the tutors for the various Ghanaian languages
- Faced with the prospect of turning away good students who did not have full competence in the language or languages that the particular college specializes in, some colleges have in the past ignored the admission requirements and have admitted students who were neither mother tongue nor first language speakers of the GhLs that the college specializes in.

In any case, since only eleven Ghanaian languages benefited from the teacher training programmes, it implies that the majority of language communities have not and are not being currently catered for in the teacher training colleges. Some languages with significant L1 speakers have been excluded.

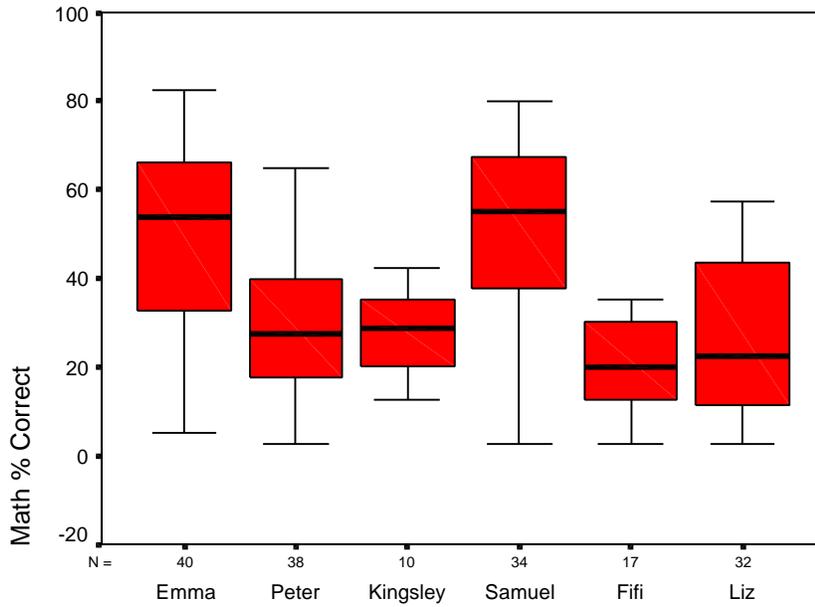
IMPACT OF MOI ON ACHIEVEMENT

The refusal to implement the official language policy has much to do with its likely impact on educational achievement. It would appear that English MoI schools perform better at external exams, which are usually in English. Tests administered to specially selected English Medium Early (EME) and English Medium Late (EML) schools in Ghana, as reported in Hawkes (1977?) showed the crude scores favouring EME. However, the gross overall mean difference was found to be small after the samples were adjusted.

Preliminary and inconclusive tests for Grades 2 and 3 in the six IEQ2 Study schools studied conducted by Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) for Mathematics, English and other subjects seem to suggest that the two English medium schools (Emma and Samuel) have higher scores than the remaining four bilingual schools: Fiifi, Peter, Liz and Kingsley.

² The erstwhile School of Ghana Languages trained higher-level teachers in eight languages. Since 1992, this responsibility fell to the University College of Education, Winneba.

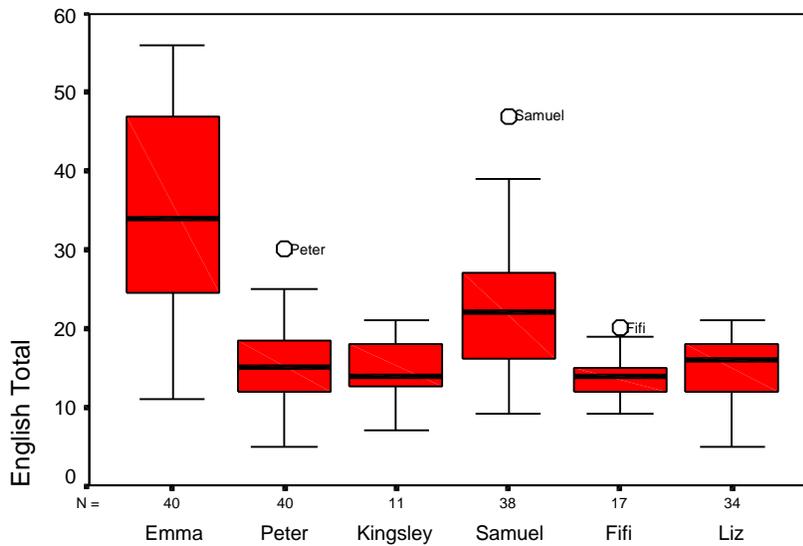
Chart 1: Overall P 2 Mathematics Scores



SCHID

Chart 2: Overall P 2 English Scores

Study Schools' English Test Scores



SCHID

There is no conclusive evidence to show that medium of instruction is the main factor responsible for level of performance since it was not possible to control for other variables. However, what is taught, in what medium it is taught, what aids or materials are available, teachers' attitude and commitment, pupils and parents commitment are factors that cannot be eliminated in the quest for explanations to the question of why one school outperforms another in tests such as these.

Demographics collected from all six sites show that in addition to the use of an English MoI, both Emma and Samuel differ from the rest in certain other respects. The parents of pupils are relatively better off, they have white colour jobs and are better educated. Emma and Samuel parents read at home more often and their children have a greater exposure to reading materials at home. The main occupation of parents of the four rural schools is farming-related. Rural children are not usually spared farm chores. Not only are their after school hours taken up by farm work, it is not unusual for such children to absent themselves from school to help parents on the farm. Moreover, physical exertion may leave rural parents and pupils too exhausted at the end of the day to have time for reading and homework. Even the difference in environment between rural and urban homes cannot be discounted. Electricity may allow an urban child to do homework in the evening, if the TV is not too much of a distraction, but a rural child has only at best a kerosene lamp.

Emma and Samuel, the two English medium schools, differ in several dimensions. Emma is a private school serving the needs of an elite community; it is more homogeneous³ and better resourced than Samuel and Emma parents are better educated. This should translate into greater commitment of Emma parents to their children's education. The University guarantees more competitive conditions of service to Emma teachers than the Ghana Education Service would. Emma teachers are likely to be more motivated and this should translate into better performance.

CONCLUSION

In fashioning a language policy for Ghana, policy makers need to consider the complex linguistic context of the country as well as teaching and learning. These issues are summarized in the table below. Linguistic and ethnic diversities pose peculiar challenges. The success of the language policy will also depend on several other factors, one of which must be the manner in which the policy is marketed to all stakeholders. There cannot be support for a policy whose rationale is misunderstood. In the case of Ghana's policy, the teacher's role is crucial to the success or failure of the policy. His or her training, supervision and motivation are important. It came to light that in one rural school, teachers and pupils took the day off whenever it rained. In another, school was cancelled because there was the district's teachers' meeting. This was a meeting, which could have been scheduled for the afternoon or a

³ Emma pupils, 76.9% of whom gave Twi as their first language, mentioned three other languages as their first language. In the case of Samuel, 61.5% were Kasem-speaking while the rest spoke as many as ten other languages.

Saturday to save a school day. Dissatisfied rural teachers prioritise their farms and trading ventures. Policy makers and implementers need to understand the intricacies of the linguistic situation and the dynamics of the classroom environment. Then a cost benefit analysis becomes necessary to the decision to commit resources and in what quantities to the sectors that will support the implementation of the policy.

TEACHING AND INSTRUCTIONAL ISSUES	
PROBLEM	EFFECT
Use of English as MoI	Children's level of participation low
Teacher does not speak predominant local language	Teacher will not teach or use predominant language
Teacher has not been trained to teach predominant local language or use it as MoI	Teacher does not have confidence or appropriate meta-language when using the predominant local language
Teacher has not been educated sufficiently on the benefits of L1 education	Teacher does not sympathize with the need to teach local language or use it as MoI
No textbooks in local language	Teacher has to improvise and teaching can suffer if teacher not good at improvising.
No refresher courses for teachers and circuit supervisors not active	Teaching methods are outmoded and do not benefit from new trends. Teachers do not feel accountable.
RURAL ~ URBAN DIFFERENCES	
ISSUE	EFFECT
Parents of urban-based pupils are generally better-off, literate and more concerned about their children's education. Urban PTAs are more active and supportive.	Teachers of urban-based schools better supervised and more accountable. Do better work and enhance student performance.
Urban child has more time for study. Rural child must help family make a living on the farm	The rural child is less exposed to reading and learning materials at home and has less help with homework.
External, end-of-school tests are in English and even those on local languages have English instructions.	Rural students disadvantaged, as tests measure competence in English even for content subjects.

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