

## **An Overview of the Language-in-Education Policy in Ghana: Emerging Issues**

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**Abstract:** This study presents the history of language policy in Ghana and discusses some emerging issues of the policy at the lower primary school level. In a brief recap, the study highlights the undulating language-in-education policy from 1925-2007. Ghana, like most African countries is still grappling with the choice of a particular medium of instruction. Despite the advantage of between 60-80 indigenous Ghanaian languages and dialects, the language-in-education policy is inconclusive of which language to use as medium of instruction in lower primary classrooms. The study points out that, the unstable nature of the policy is compounded by chronic challenges such as low levels of teacher professionalism, inappropriate use of classroom curricula, lack of adequate classroom facilities and inadequate trained teachers to teach in mother-tongue. In the mist of all these, the study discusses issues on teacher capacity, teaching and learning materials, parent's and pupil's views all which are equally crucial for a successful implementation of the language-in-education policy, at the lower primary school level. The study concludes that if these issues are properly addressed, the gap between 'theory' and 'practice' will be resolved at the implementation stage. The study therefore, recommends a more holistic approach to the implementation of the language-in-education policy for a solid foundation for pupil's literacy skills acquisition in their early years schooling.

**Key words:** Medium of instruction, implementation, indigenous Ghanaian languages, compounded, schooling, pupil's

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### **INTRODUCTION**

**A history of mother-tongue medium of education in Ghana:** Ghana, like most African states is linguistically complex in nature (Owu-Ewie, 2013). The languages spoken in Ghana are approximately 45-60 (Apronti and Denteh, 1969; Anyidoho and Dakubu, 2008). These languages are spread over a population of approximately 28 million people. This, thus, confirms the multilingual status of Ghana. Some of these languages in Ghana have their dialectal variations and this linguistic dialectal diversity exists in most communities in the country. A language such as Akan has several dialects which are spread disproportionately across the country and beyond. There are Akan speakers in the Brong Ahafo, Volta Region and the borders in Cote d'Ivoire. Similarly, ewe, one of the major languages in the country has been affected by colonial boundary drawing. As a result, a large percentage of its speakers are in the Republic of Togo. There are also minority languages which have a small number of native speakers.

Before this, when the Europeans finally settled in the then Gold Coast by 1824, the need to use Ghanaian language for communication became paramount,

especially when an attempt to start a school began. By 1882 an education development guide was drawn. With this guide, several attempts were made to formalise some Ghanaian languages such as Ewe, Fante, Twi, Nzema and Ga in addition to the English language in schools (Sackey, 1997). Soon the practice of using European languages side by side these Ghanaian languages became a common feature. It also became necessary to set up committees to review the languages used as medium of instruction in the schools. One of the first of these committees became known as the Governor Guggisberg's education policy of 1920 which drew up sixteen principles for a language in education policy for the country. It stated among other things that: "while an English education must be given, it must be based solidly on the vernacular" (McWilliam and Kwamena-Poh, 1975). This clause gave the document its impetus to be passed easily into a policy for language use in education. To support this, the Phelps-Stokes Commission was also set up to investigate the British educational policy in the then Gold Coast. By 1925, the report of the commission received legal support and it became an official document known as the Phelps-Stoke Commission Report which was the promulgation of the first legislation on the use of Ewe, Fante, Twi and Ga as

approved Ghanaian languages for use as medium of instruction in the first 3 years of primary education. From this point, subsequent reviews stepped up the formulation of a permanent language policy in education in Ghana. The first major review was the Accelerated Development Plan which was launched in 1951. In his study, Boadi (1976) observed that the aim of the Accelerated Development Plan was to provide primary schools with:

A sound foundation for citizenship with permanent literacy in both English and the vernacular. At the beginning of the course, instruction will be given through the medium of the local vernacular with English taught as a new language. As soon as possible, there will be transition from the vernacular to English as the medium of instruction and the upper classes will receive instruction through the medium of English, except that throughout the whole course, the vernacular will receive special study

This statement thus reiterates affirmation that it better for every school going child to begin school in a familiar language. However, from 1957-1963 the decision of using a Ghanaian language as medium of instruction from P1-P3 was rescinded and English was made the medium of instruction throughout primary school.

To correct this, in 1963, another education review committee the Barnard Commission was set up. The mandate of the Barnard Commission was to review the existing language in use for primary education and to “investigate the feasibility of using English as a medium of instruction and also consider the important questions of whether the use of English as the medium of instruction throughout the primary school course and if such a step was wise and possible, to propose concrete ways and means” (Boadi, 1976). The report of the Barnard Commission presented two views on the issue. The majority view was in favour of using Ghanaian language in the first 3 years of Primary education while the minority view opted for English as a medium of instruction throughout primary education. Unfortunately, the minority view was accepted by the government which proposed that English become the medium of instruction from primary class one for the next 10 years.

In 1967, when a new government, the National Liberation Council (NLC) was formed, another Education Review Committee was set up. The committee, at the end of its mandate, advocated that a Ghanaian language be used as medium of instruction in the first 3 years of primary school while English language was to commence in the 4 years whilst Ghanaian language

continued to be studied as a subject. However, it was suggested that in the Metropolitan Municipalities and other peri-urban areas, the transition to an English medium of instruction could be earlier than in primary class four.

After just 1 year, in 1968, still in a fervent search for a permanent solution to the language policy in education and to support the government’s decision to use a Ghanaian language as medium of instruction in early years of school, the then commissioner for education, in an address at the University of Ghana, petitioned the university to support the government to come up with an appropriate language policy in education for the country. Significantly, the commissioner’s words concerning the issue of the language of education are as follows:

It is my hope that educational policy on language will in future be guided by the results of your research both into the languages themselves and their social and cultural values and their pedagogy (Apronti and Denteh, 1969)

In 1971, a directive from the Ministry of Education, in a seven bullet point circular to all public schools reiterated use of Ghanaian language as medium of instruction for the first 3 years of primary school. To enforce this policy directive, Ghanaian language subject organizers were appointed in all the regions of the country. Other suggestions included a future consideration to make Ghanaian language one of the subject requirements for the national middle school leaving certificate examination and that new teachers should be posted to schools where they could competently use and teach the appropriate Ghanaian language of the school. There were further arrangements to make Ghanaian language compulsory in all training colleges. In addition, Ghanaian language was to be made an introductory course at the University of Cape Coast.

In 1972, there was a new twist to the language-in education policy. In order to make the teaching of Ghanaian language effective, schools situated in the urban areas were asked to put pupils into language groups, especially in classes where a large number of the pupils speak another Ghanaian language other than the government approved language of instruction. The pupils were to be taught their mother tongue in designated periods. This policy thus gave the schools the privilege of selecting the Ghanaian language to be taught, depending on the linguistic composition of the class. This was supported by providing of text books and teachers who were proficient and could teach pupils in that particular language. Also, Ghanaian language education

supervisors were appointed to all the districts in the country. Another notable provision by the government and the Ministry of Education was the establishment of the school of Ghanaian language at Ajumako in the central region of Ghana.

In 1974, a new government the National Redemption Council formed another Educational Review Committee. The committee recommended a continuation of the use of Ghanaian language as medium of instruction in primary classes 1-3. In addition, Ghanaian languages were to be made compulsory subjects from Primary class four (P4) through junior secondary school to senior secondary school (Andoh-Kumi, 1992).

By January, 2002, due to unsatisfactory results in literacy, especially at the basic school level, a new Educational Review Committee was initiated which became known Anamuah-Mensah Commission. The mandate of the committee was to re-examine the structure of the educational system and make recommendations. The findings of the Anamuah-Mensah Commission recommended that:

Either the local or English language should be used as a medium of instruction at the kindergarten and lower primary as appropriate where teachers and teaching and learning materials are available, local languages must be used as the medium of instruction within a period of 5 years, the ministry of education and the GES should make the necessary preparations for a more effective implementation of the use of local language as a medium of instruction. This should include: the training of more local language teachers and the provision of teaching and learning materials (Anamoah-Mensah, 2004)

Despite these recommendations, in May, 2002, a new language-in-education policy was promulgated. The directive from the Ministry of Education stated that, English language should be used as the medium of instruction from primary class one onwards. However, it did not take long before the policy received criticisms from different people in academia, politics and education and some other citizens. The reaction was so strong that within a short time the government made an announcement to revert the language-in-education policy.

By 2004, the previous 'English only' language in education policy was reversed. Mother-tongue was to be used as medium of instruction for the first 3 years of primary school while English was to be taught as a subject. Then, from primary class four onwards, English continued as the sole medium of instruction and Ghanaian

language continued to be taught as a subject up to secondary school. In order to strengthen this new mother-tongue language-in-education policy, especially at the lower primary level, a number of interventions were necessitated with assistance from donor agencies such as the World Bank, UNESCO and USAID. Finally, in 2006, with financial aid from USAID and technical support from Education Quality for All (EQUALL), the National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP) was formed to support the educational reforms in lower primary schools across the country. The NALAP programme also reiterated that pupils learn to acquire literacy skills when they are taught in a language that they understand and speak. The main mandate of NALAP, therefore was to directly support the 2004 Education Reform of the Ministry of Education (MOE) which states that:

Where teachers and learning materials are available and the linguistic composition of classes is fairly uniform, the children's first language must be used as the dominant medium of instruction in Kindergarten and lower primary school (Anamoah-Mensah, 2004)

The search for a suitable language-in-education policy in Ghana is still on-going. 'The learning project' another mother-tongue literacy project in collaboration with the United State Agency for International Development (USAID), 'FHI 360', an International Human Development Non-governmental Organization and Ghana education service is fervently trying to find lasting solutions to the language-in-education policy issues and to improve the literacy skills for all lower primary pupils all by the year 2019.

**Summary:** The first part of the study outlined the various changes in the language-in-education policy in Ghana. Based on the above information provided on the frequent changes in the language-in-education policy in Ghana, it can be deduced that there are no laid down guidelines and procedures that needed to be followed for a change. In addition, the changes to the policy indicate that there was hardly any consideration for monitoring and evaluation of a policy before another one is introduced. It is presumed that one major factor for the frequent changes in the language-in-education policy was the poor academic performance of pupils in basic literacy skills at the lower primary school level. However, as observed by other research findings (Baker, 2001; Owu-Ewie, 2006; Ansre, 2017), there are other overlapping factors, aside the medium of instruction that account for pupil's successful academic performance in literacy skills at the lower primary school level. The next study of the study discusses some of these factors.

## **TEACHER TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING**

According to Spillane *et al.* (2002), a teacher's capacity encapsulates a teacher's knowledge and skills that supports the availability of resources and personnel necessary for a consistent implementation of a policy. Some research findings indicate that teachers may be faintly aware of the guidelines of the language policy; however, their reinterpretation of the policy is mostly influenced by immediate classroom priorities that affect daily lessons and pupil's overall outcome of the learning process (Wang, 2008; Ansre, 2017). One of the major gaps between the intentions of the language-in-policy and the realities of the implementation at the basic level is the issue of teacher capacity. According to Owu-Ewie (2006) one of the reasons why the minister of education in 2002, pushed for the revision of the language policy in education was the "lack of Ghanaian language teachers specifically trained to teach content subjects in the Ghanaian language". The Minister further explained that, teachers who could speak the Ghanaian language may not necessarily be able to teach it in the classroom. However, the Minister failed to recognise that teacher training colleges used English as medium of instruction and not Ghanaian language medium of instruction which the teachers were eventually going to use as medium of instruction in the classroom. The question then is how could the teachers teach in a Ghanaian language if there were apparent discrepancies between the language of training for teachers at the training colleges and the medium of instruction in the classroom as stated by the policy? Ansre (2017) in her study, equally observed that most teachers and head teachers had knowledge deficiencies on basic facts of the language-in-education policy and as such could not effectively implement the policy in the classrooms. This may also have accounted for the frequent changes of the policy since poor implementation of the policy adversely affected pupil's successful academic performance. In order then to forestall frequent changes in the language-in-education policy, the study advocates for capacity development strategies that will equip teachers with literacy skills in the local languages and frequent workshops and seminars for teachers and other stakeholders in education to handle issues with languages diversity and teacher capacity building and development in the lower primary classroom. In addition, the study suggest periodic reviews and evaluation of the tenets of language-in-education itself and the implementation of the policy in the classroom.

**Teaching and learning materials:** According to the Anonymous (2002) bi-lingual language-in education policy directive, 11 local languages are officially designated as languages for medium of instruction from

KG 1-P3 across the country. However, unavailability of teaching and learning materials has been a big challenge to the effective implementation of this policy directive. Research evidence confirms that a consistent characteristic in improving pupil's academic performance is the availability of teaching and learning materials (Trudell, 2016). Other research findings by Read (2015) has established the importance of the provision of textbooks, teaching guides and supplementary materials for the effective implementation of the mother-tongue language-in-education policy. Ansre (2017) observed that, majority of lower primary schools were poorly resourced. Lack of teaching and learning materials in the selected Ghanaian language was thus a setback in the successful implementation of the policy. As part of its mandate, the NALAP programme in Ghana designed and developed textbooks, teacher guides and other teaching and learning materials in the 11 approved Ghanaian languages for all KG1-P3 classrooms across the country. However, for various reasons, most of these teaching and learning materials could not be used effectively to support the implementation of the policy. Teacher's language barrier was a major reason why some teachers could not use the teaching and learning materials effectively. As a result, as rightly noted by Alidou *et al.* (2006), instances of acute privation of textbooks and teacher guides force teachers to translate textbooks meant for instruction in the second or foreign language into the mother tongue of the pupils when teaching in the classroom and this does not support the implementation process.

**Multilingual classrooms:** There is a growing consensus that multilingualism is the norm and monolingualism the exception. As stated earlier, most African countries, including Ghana are linguistically diverse. This diversity according to Chumbow remains an obstacle in policy formulation and implementation. The language-in education policy in Ghana categorically states that:

Given the great multiplicity of Ghanaian languages, the most obvious of these difficulties is how languages to provide instruction to a class of classes of children with diverse home languages as is increasingly the case of classes in both urban and rural settings government, therefore, further accepts the recommendation of the committee that where teaching and learning materials are available and the linguistic composition of the classes is fairly uniform, the children's first language must be used as the dominant medium of instruction in Kindergarten and lower primary school (Anamoah-Mensah, 2004)

Despite this government directive, most schools, due to various factors, failed to implement the policy accordingly. Language diversity in most Ghanaian urban and peri-urban classroom settings is a norm. Teachers in these classrooms are not polyglots and are not able to use more than one language as a medium of instruction. Some teachers are able to code-switch and code-mix effectively but in such instances pupils who are not proficient in the language(s) used for to code-switch and code-mix are usually at a disadvantage. The obvious option in these classrooms is an English medium of instruction which is in compliance with the above policy directives, indicating that when the linguistic composition of the classrooms are not uniform then using the pupil's first language or mother-tongue as medium of instruction is not practicable. Thus, a stable language-in-education policy is only feasible if appropriate measures are taken to address language diversity in the lower primary classrooms.

**Parent's voices:** The perception of English as a language of status and prestige among indigenous African language speakers has increased over years. Klerk (2002) noted that English is a language without roots on the continent but it has a wider distribution of speakers across the African continent. With such importance attached to the English language, most parents would want their wards to speak English by even by the time they start school. Yet, several studies (Fafunwa *et al.*, 1989; Pinnock and Vijayakumar, 2009; Owu-Ewie, 2013) have confirmed the importance of mother tongue medium of instruction in the psychological, intellectual and cognitive development of children in their early years of school. Parents further believe that when teachers teach their wards in English, the children's ability to speak English is enhanced. To such parents, children who are able to speak English are more confident and this promotes interactions with other people from other language backgrounds. According to OlaOlorun *et al.* (2013), most parents view English as a language of power and would therefore wish that their wards be taught in the English language as soon as they start schooling.

Klerk (2002) further explains that parent's desire to have their wards taught in English in their early years of schooling is not because they want to jettison their mother-tongue for English. Probably, parent's apprehensions and misconceptions about mother-tongue medium of instruction are based on lack of adequate knowledge on a language-in-education policy that embraces a curriculum which adequately and consistently caters for early literacy and language development in mother-tongue while ensuring a gradual transition English. The studies view is that if the implementation of the language-in-education policy fails to dialogue with parents and orient them on the importance of the mother-tongue medium of instruction they feel justified to

find alternatives which may invariably result in poor academic and literacy development for their wards. Nyarigoti and Ambiyi (2014) are also of the view that parent's opposition to mother tongue medium of instruction may stem from uninformed opinions of the importance of mother tongue in the literacy development of pupils. It is therefore paramount that "policy advocacy and awareness-raising activities should be prioritized regarding the realities of pedagogy and language" (Trudell, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

The study traces the history of the language-in-education policy from the Gold Coast period in 1925 to present day Ghana in 2017. It is evident that the main fluctuations of the language-in-education policy as presented is as a result of what Bamgbose (2008, 1976) explains as lack of political will on the part of governments and other stakeholders in education to prioritise education. In Ghana, apart from the NALAP programme which was well supported with teaching and learning materials, some level of teacher capacity building and public policy dialogue on the benefits of mother-tongue education in early years of schooling, none of the other language-in-education reviews had any practical set goals for early learners in school. Teaching and learning in most Ghanaian lower primary classrooms is mediated through the English language or Ghanaian language. However, teachers are hardly supported with training to teach in English and even in the Ghanaian language. The erroneous assumption is that once a teacher is proficient in English or Ghanaian language, that teacher could effectively teach using either or both of these media without any difficulty. The inconsistency in the transition period from mother-tongue medium of instruction to English medium of instruction is another significant flaw of the language-in-education policy in Ghana over the years. As stated, Ghana's language-in-education policy is still undergoing changes but there is a need to institute a more sustainable education infrastructure that will successfully address the needs of learners in their early years of school.

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