

LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION IN AFRICA – THE MOST IMPORTANT AND LEAST APPRECIATED ISSUE

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the language of instruction, also called ‘the least appreciated of all the major educational problems’. It shows how little attention is paid to this issue in donor policies as well as in the recent ‘World Bank education strategy 2020’. Donors to education in Africa seem to focus on learning outcomes but they do not see that in order to improve learning outcomes, a key focus must be on support to the development and use of the most appropriate language of instruction and literacy from the learner’s perspective. The article discusses the ‘quality’ of education and the point is made that quality of education cannot be separated from the important question of which language should be used for education. Retaining the former colonial languages as languages of instruction may serve a small elite but works to the disadvantage of the majority of Africans. The language of instruction is a powerful mechanism for social stratification, increasing inequalities. Towards the end of the article the myth of the many languages in Africa is discussed.

Keywords: language of instruction, multilingualism, quality of education, learning outcomes, donor policies, increasing inequalities

THE MAJOR LEARNING PROBLEM IN AFRICA

There seems to be general agreement that children learn better when they understand what the teacher is saying. In Africa this is not the case. Instruction is given in a foreign language, while children and teachers alike speak African languages. The foreign language, in most countries the language of the former colonial master, and in Africa often called the ‘national’ language, is a language neither pupils nor teachers master well and do not normally speak outside school.

In 1980 Pai Obanya, who was then the director of the Unesco office in west Africa, Breda in Senegal, noted that:

It has always been felt by African educationists that the African child’s major learning problem is linguistic. Instruction is given in a language that is not normally used in his immediate environment, a language which neither the learner nor the teacher understands and uses well enough (Obanya 1980: 88).

Obanya is using an educational argument. He is concerned with facilitating learning, with communication between teacher and pupils. If the African child’s major learning

difficulty really is a linguistic problem, and I tend to agree with Obanya that it is, then all the attention of African policy makers and aid from Western donors should be devoted to a strengthening of the African languages as languages of instruction, especially in basic education. The concept 'education for all' becomes a completely empty concept if the linguistic environment of the basic learners is not taken into account.

In 1982 the Ministers of Education in Africa met in Harare in Zimbabwe to discuss the use of African languages as languages of education. They stressed that

there is an urgent and pressing need for the use of African languages as languages of education. The urgency arises when one considers the total commitment of the states to development. Development in this respect consists of the development of national unity; cultural development; and economic and social development. Cultural development is basic to the other two Language is a living instrument of culture, so that, from this point of view, language development is paramount. But language is also an instrument of communication, in fact the only complete and the most important instrument as such. Language usage therefore is of paramount importance also for social and economic development (ED-82: 111).

As we see here, the Ministers are not only concerned about retaining African languages in order to preserve culture, but they are also using educational arguments. Language is more than culture.

Having English (in the so-called Anglophone), French (in the so-called Francophone) or Portuguese (in the so-called Lusophone countries) as the language of instruction does not promote understanding of what is learnt in the majority of schools in Africa. As Ayo Bamgbose (2005: 255) correctly observed:

Outside Africa, no one questions why the languages of countries with smaller populations in Europe should be used as a medium, even up to and including the university level. What seems to be lacking in many African countries is the political will to break away from the colonial policy and practice of limiting mother tongue education to lower primary classes. Where such a will exists, much can be done in a short period of time.

THE LEAST APPRECIATED OF ALL THE MAJOR EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS

Reflecting on the World Crisis in Education, in the 1980s, Phillip Coombs (1985: 256) contended:

The issue of what language or languages to adopt as the medium of instruction at successive levels of education is one of the pedagogically most difficult and politically explosive political issues faced by schools in a great many countries. Paradoxically, however, the choice of language of instruction is also one of the least appreciated of all the major educational problems that come before international forums.

This least appreciated problem is neither taken seriously in the new World Bank strategy that is supposed to move the international discussion from ‘Education for All’ to ‘Learning for All’, nor in the preparation for reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Neither is the biggest educational problem in Africa taken seriously in the 2014 Global Monitoring Report. The international discussion on education, spearheaded by the donors (who now like to call themselves ‘development partners’) has moved from a great concern about access to schooling to a concern about quality. But this quality discussion lacks a language component. How can any education be of quality when teachers and pupils have difficulties communicating?

FROM ‘EDUCATION FOR ALL’ TO ‘LEARNING FOR ALL’

In 2011 the World Bank (2011) released its Education Strategy 2020 called ‘Learning for all: Investing in people’s knowledge and skills to promote development’. One would think that the move from Education for All to Learning for All would signify a move from the teacher, the educator to the pupil, the learner. I had expected that this change in phraseology would also lead to an analysis of why so many students, especially in sub-Saharan Africa drop out of school, repeat grades or sit year after year hardly learning anything. The World Bank group also admitted: ‘What matters for growth is not the years that students spend in school but what they learn’ (World Bank 2011: 2).

In the new strategy the World Bank notes that for many students more schooling has not resulted in more knowledge and skills necessary for job creation. According to the World Bank group:

Several studies illustrate the seriousness of the learning challenge. More than 30 per-cent of Malian youths aged 15–19 years who completed six years of schooling could not read a simple sentence; the same was true of more than 50 per-cent of Kenyan youths (World Bank 2011: 6–7).

The first thing I asked myself when I read this sentence was: In whose language could the youth not read a simple sentence? In their own language or a language foreign to them, a language that they hardly hear around them. In an article on illiteracy in Sierra Leone, Kingsley Banya (1993) wrote:

Only about 25% of the country’s population were (in 1961) literate in English, which is the official language. However, most people are literate in Krio, which is the lingua franca of the country ... in absolute numbers there has been a tremendous expansion in the number of illiterates. As the population has increased, the number of literate people has not kept pace; 85 out of every 100 Sierra Leones are now illiterate (Banya 1993: 163).

Banya classified as illiterate those Sierra Leoneans who cannot write and read English even though they may read and write Krio, the lingua franca of their country! If a native

Englishman who reads and writes English, but not any other language, were likewise classified as illiterate, there would be many illiterates in the English-speaking world.

ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN AFRICA

Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG2) requires the world to ‘Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling’. In 2010, 61 million children of primary school age were out of school. More than half of them (33 million) were in sub-Saharan Africa. In whose language were these children required to learn? With more children completing primary education, the demand for secondary education is growing. African children speak African languages while instruction is given in an exogenous language. How is it possible to give quality education for all in a language mastered by few?

A re-visioning of education and development for the post-2015 period would mean outlining a policy where languages that children master comfortably are made the languages of instruction. This problem has not been tackled by the international community. Africans are multilingual in African languages and it would be possible almost everywhere in Africa to use the bigger cross-border languages as languages of instruction up to the highest level of schooling.

In order to investigate the best ways forward for the European Union (EU) in supporting the education sector, the European Commission (EC) commissioned a study on donor policies, practices and investment priorities in education (Mercer 2013a). The study relied on a mixed set of methods, including a review of about 160 documents and articles, data analysis and some complementary semi-structured interviews. It examined the overall development policy or strategy documents of 18 OECD DAC countries, three multilateral agencies and Unicef and their education policy documents that deal with the sector as a whole from early childhood education and development through to higher education, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and, in some cases, non-formal education. The period covered was mainly from 2005 to 2012, although some reference was made to earlier policies and strategies. For the discussion of investment priorities, all OECD-DAC countries were included and a comparison was made between data from 2002–2003 and 2009–2010. Data from the OECD DAC database was used as adjusted by the Unesco Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report (GMR) team in preparation for the GMR 2012.

PRIORITY TO AFRICA

Donors have at several high level events, such as the UN MDG summits and the Gleneagles G8 meetings, manifested their commitment to achieving the MDGs in Africa by giving priority to the region in the allocation of aid resources (Mercer 2013a). In June 2005, the member states of the European Union agreed to double aid between

2004 and 2010, and allocate half of the increase to Africa. The commitment to Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, was re-confirmed in 13 of the 22 development policies under review, with seven donor governments stipulating that Africa should receive the highest priority in development cooperation.

EDUCATION AS A PRIORITY

For 17 of the 22 donors making up this study, education was highlighted as an important area for development cooperation. In 12 cases the word ‘priority’ or the phrase ‘key sector’ was used when education and training were considered a priority. Some donors are more specific about the importance of education within their overall development policy. For example, as a core element of refocusing its development policy, Germany stated that it will be ‘combating the causes of poverty by investing in education, economic development, crisis prevention and health’ (BMZ 2011). In the UK, ‘changing children’s lives through learning’, alongside specific targets, is specified as one of eight main areas of DFID’s work (DFID 2011). Similarly, the Asian Development Bank has set out to refocus its operations into five core specializations, one of which is education (AsDB 2008).

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

Mercer (2013a: 8) noted that there is a sense of urgency regarding the low quality of education in developing countries with all donors stressing the need for quality improvements and giving extensive attention to the topic. There appears at the same time to be great awareness of the complexity of the issues involved. Improving the quality of education lies at the heart of DFID’s education strategy (DFID 2010) in the conviction that improved cognitive skills for more children combined with an appropriate number of years of schooling can contribute towards an annual growth in gross domestic product (GDP) and that improving the learning outcomes of poor performers in school helps to reduce income inequality.

He found by analysing the many donor policies on educational quality that no strategies mention the crucial matter of which language children learn best in. He concluded:

To improve learning outcomes, therefore, a key focus must be on support to the development and use of the most appropriate language of instruction and literacy from the learner’s perspective. Allied to that could be a strategy to support the well qualified teaching of foreign languages in school (Mercer 2013a: 8/9).

The best way to improve the learning outcomes of poor performers in school would be to have them learn in the language they know best and normally speak. It is a sad finding that none of donor policies on educational quality discusses this most important and least appreciated educational challenge.

On the 23rd of May 2013, the European Union hosted a high-level international conference to discuss the global opportunities and challenges in education and development (European Commission 2013). Speakers at the conference called for a stronger global movement to push for progress in getting children in to school and giving them the opportunity to learn. They noted that education should be at the centre of a global development agenda ‘because of the contribution it makes to many development areas, including employment, health, environmental sustainability, peace building and food security. Education also contributes to broader democratic governance and citizenship’ (European Commission 2013: 3).

If the international community is really serious about reducing the multiple barriers to access for marginalized communities and improving the quality of education so that children are learning when in school, it is important to look at the language children are learning in. There can be no democratic governance if important papers and laws are written in a language citizens do not master well, speeches and political messages given in languages people do not normally speak.

THE LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION

In 2000 the National Council for Kiswahili, BAKITA, organized a two-day conference on the language of instruction and quality of education in Tanzania. Martha Qorro, at that time the Head of Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics at the University of Dar es Salaam, and with a doctorate in the teaching of English, was present at that conference. On the second day of the conference the Minister responsible for Education, a professor of science by profession, was invited to give some closing remarks. Qorro reported that his final comment on the issue of language of instruction was that the Government did not have money to do experiments and ‘waste’ the few resources on the language of instruction. ‘The little money that is available will be spent on improving the quality of education and not on the language of instruction,’ he concluded, and declared that the conference was closed. From the Minister’s remarks, one gathers that the language of instruction is seen as separate from the process of delivering quality education. The Minister even considered spending funds on the language of instruction as a waste of resources. Some of those who participated in the heated discussion were left with questions unanswered. Martha Qorro (2009:60) asked:

For example, did the Minister understand the meaning of language of instruction? How does the language of instruction relate to education, and quality education for that matter? Is it possible to improve the quality of education without addressing the issue of language of instruction? If, for example, the conference had been on electrification of a number of schools, would the Minister have said that there was no money to “waste” on copper wires and that the little money available would be spent on supplying electricity to the schools! How else is the electrification process to take place if not through copper wires? Or, suppose the issue under discussion had been supplying water to the schools,

would the Minister have said that there was no money for pipes and that the little money available would be spent on supplying water to the schools, but no money to “waste” on pipes!

The language of instruction is the vehicle through which knowledge is transmitted. When discussing the language of instruction issue in Africa, one often hears that it would be too costly for the African countries to switch the language of instruction from an ex-colonial and foreign language into a familiar African language that the child masters well. One hears arguments such as books have to be developed and published, new terminology created. Sometimes these arguments do not hold water. In Tanzania, for instance, a project based at the Institute for Kiswahili Research has developed textbooks for the whole of the secondary school system (Mulokozi *et al.* 2008). Here there is only a matter of getting them published in large enough quantities and distributed to the schools. With the new desktop printing facilities, books and teaching materials in local languages can be produced rather cheaply (Heugh 2006; Kosonen 2010).

There are, however, other economic consequences of this choice that are under-researched. These are the costs involved in having children sit year after year in school, hardly learning any subject matter but learning that they are less capable, having to repeat classes, dropping out of school, getting low grades because they simply do not master the language of instruction. Parents are spending lots of money on school fees, school uniforms, transport costs and might have needed their children at home to do useful chores. Having the foreign, though often termed official language as the language of instruction prevents the students from really grasping the subject matter the teacher wants to convey, from developing their own language and from learning the foreign language. They lose out on three fronts. Together with a young economist from Zimbabwe, I once worked on a research proposal to investigate the cost of not using a familiar African language, often termed a national language as the medium of instruction (Brock-Utne and Nota 2010).

WHEN THE MOST IMPORTANT EDUCATIONAL QUESTION IS OVERLOOKED

There is little doubt that the systematic but frequently ignored differences between the language and culture of the school and the language and culture of the learner's community have often resulted in educational programmes with only marginal success at teaching anything except self-depreciation (Okonkwo 1983: 377).

The Nigerian sociolinguist Okonkwo (1983) is concerned about the fact that both the language and the culture of the school are foreign to the African child. He is concerned with the simultaneous learnings going on in classrooms where the pupils do not understand what the teacher is trying to teach them. One always learns something in an educational situation but it may not be what the teacher had planned as intended

learning outcomes. In a classroom where children do not understand what the teacher is saying, they learn that they are stupid, that school learning is nothing for them, that they should stop dreaming of higher education but be satisfied with their place in life. The ‘education for all’ strategy formulated at the important educational conference in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, was meant to target the poor (Brock-Utne 2000; Brock-Utne 2005a; Brock-Utne 2005b). In an article on ‘education for all: policy lessons from high-achieving countries’, Santosh Mehrotra (1998:479) draws our attention to what he sees as the most important characteristic of those developing countries that really target the poor and have the highest percentage of the population with a completed basic education: ‘The experience of the high-achievers has been unequivocal: the mother tongue was used as the medium of instruction at the primary level in all cases.’

Yet in the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar there was, according to Dutcher (2004), no mention of the language issue in the plenary sessions of the conference. There is also little consideration of the language issue in the resulting documents from the Forum. There is limited reference in official documents to the fact that millions of children are entering school without knowing the language of instruction. Many of these children are in Africa. The only type of formal schooling available to these children is in a language they neither speak nor understand. Nadine Dutcher (2004:8) said:

It is shocking that the international dialogue on Education for All has not confronted the problems children face when they enter school not understanding the medium of instruction, when they are expected to learn a new language at the same time as they are learning in and through the new language. The basic problem is that children cannot understand what the teacher is saying! We believe that if international planners had faced these issues on a global scale, there would have been progress to report. However, instead of making changes that would lead to real advancement, the international community has simply repledged itself to the same goals, merely moving the target ahead from the year 2000 to 2015.

With the help of expatriate consultants, teacher guides are being worked out and teacher training courses given to have African teachers become more ‘learner-centred’, to help them activate their students and engage them in critical thinking and dialogue. Teachers are asked to abandon a teacher style where students just copy notes from the blackboard, learn their notes by heart and repeat them at tests. Little thought has been given to the fact that this teaching style might be the only one possible when neither the teacher nor the students command the language of instruction.

From a socio-political aspect, the use of African national languages in the educational process represents, for those African states making the option, a sign of political sovereignty with regard to the old colonial power, as well as an assertion of their cultural identity, denied in the past by the colonialists through the harsh relegation of African languages to the inferior status of ‘vernaculars’.

The 2014 Global Monitoring Report is called ‘Teaching and learning: Achieving quality for all’ (Unesco 2014). The language that teaching and learning are going to take

place in is hardly mentioned at all. At a launch of the report in Oslo on the 3 February 2014, none of the panelists spoke about the language issue. Answering a question from the floor about the language of instruction, Asma Zubairi, research officer from the GMR team, said that the GMR 2014 mentions that there is a great need for teachers who speak minority languages. When the language of instruction is mentioned at all, it is precisely as a minority language. One paragraph has the heading, ‘Speaking a minority language can be a source of disadvantage’. Here is a quote from the text that follows:

Being born into a minority ethnic or linguistic group can seriously affect not only children’s chance of being in school, but also what they learn once there Language and ethnicity are deeply intertwined. While the language a child speaks at home is often a crucial element of personal identity and group attachment, language can be a potent source of disadvantage at school because in many countries children are taught and take tests in languages they do not speak at home. Their parents may also lack literacy skills or familiarity with official languages used in school (Unesco 2014: 198).

In Africa this situation does not concern minority languages only. It concerns also majority languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, Amharic, Oromo, Fula, Akan and Shona spoken by millions of people. The minority languages in Africa are English, French and Portuguese. These languages are spoken at home only by a tiny minority. More than 100 million people in Africa speak Kiswahili. Yet Kiswahili is not the language of instruction in any secondary school.

RISING INEQUITY

The May 2013 Report of the High Level Panel, established by the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in 2012 to advise on the global development framework beyond 2015 (United Nations 2013) underscored that rising inequity is a growing worldwide concern. The report deals with all of the millennium goals, notes to what extent they have been achieved and outlines what still has to be done. The high level panel claims that education planners have to look beyond counting the number of children sitting in classrooms and start to focus on learning. They refer to a study of 28 countries in Africa that found that more than one out of every three pupils (23 million primary school children) could not read or do basic maths after multiple years of schooling. No mention is made of the language in which the children could not read or do basic mathematics. It is most likely a foreign language, a language children do not normally speak or hear around them. The language of instruction is a powerful mechanism for social stratification, increasing inequalities (Brock-Utne 2012a).

Watkins (2013) writes about the impoverished teaching going on in African classrooms, taking Sokoto in Nigeria as an example where the children will be on the receiving end of a monotone recitation geared towards rote learning. Not that there is much learning going on. One recent survey found that 80 per cent of Sokoto’s Grade 3 pupils cannot read a single word. They have gone through three years of zero value-

added schooling.

Watkins does not make any mention of the language in which the pupils cannot read a single word. Ayo Bamgbose (2005) has shown that pupils who were allowed to study in their native language, Yoruba, did better in all subjects, including English, than those pupils who were forced to study through English, a foreign language for the majority of Africans in so-called Anglophone Africa.

When development partners are writing and talking about equity and not tackling the language of instruction issue, they are not going to the bottom of the educational problem in Africa. Unesco and Unicef (2013: 794), writing on the post-2015 development agenda, note: ‘Inequality remains a big challenge, and poverty and exclusion the major markers of disadvantage.’

Using a foreign language as the language of instruction is creating greater inequality, exclusion and social division (Brock-Utne 2012a; 2012b). The children of the elite will survive in a system where the former colonial languages are used as the languages of instruction because their parents can afford private tutoring, expensive private schools, the purchase of books and DVDs, trips to countries with native speakers of these languages. The children of poorer parents will not get these opportunities.

Unesco and Unicef (2013: 794) write about the ‘inadequate focus on teachers, who are the key agents for quality education’. In an evaluation of a quality education project in Zambia and Zimbabwe, a team of researchers (Brock-Utne *et al.* 2014) found that teachers who had been trained in action research and reflective teaching did not beat pupils any more. They gave more individual help and they had a better communication with parents. Their pupils also got significantly better grades than pupils whose teachers had not got such training. Several of these trained teachers told the evaluation team that they blamed the learning difficulties children had not on the individual pupils but on the use of a foreign language as the language of instruction. ‘If I had explained in Shona instead,’ one of the teachers in Zimbabwe told the team, ‘that particular pupil would have had no problem understanding.’

In a study in Tanzania where the same teachers taught the same topic to different secondary school classes, one day in Kiswahili and another day in English, the research team found that teachers punished the pupils only when they taught in English, never when they taught in Kiswahili (Vuzo 2007, Mwinsheikhe 2007; Brock-Utne 2007). When this was pointed out to the teachers, they were surprised. They had not been aware of this fact.

LANGUAGES IN AFRICA

There is not a single secondary school or university in sub-Saharan Africa where the language of instruction is an African language, with the exception of the use of Afrikaans in some universities in South Africa. But Africa is not Anglophone, Francophone or Lusophone. Africa is Afrophone. Africans speak African languages (Prah 2009a; 2009b). In the so-called francophone countries, only about 5 per cent of the population speak

French well, in the so-called Anglophone countries about 5 per cent master English well (Brock-Utne and Skattum 2009). One often hears that there are so many languages in Africa. It is difficult to choose one or a few to use in higher education. We shall return to this argument.

The debates in parliament in Tanzania are conducted in Kiswahili. Most of the newspapers in Tanzania, especially the interesting ones, are written in that language. Yet, the language of instruction in secondary schools as well as in higher education institutions is English, the language of the former colonial power of Tanzania. This has at least three grave consequences, consequences the European countries using more and more English in higher education, also need to consider:

1. New intellectual terms in the language people normally speak are not created, the academic vocabulary is not developed
2. The language of instruction becomes a barrier to the access of knowledge
3. Mastering of the exogenous language stratifies society and becomes a social marker creating an elite versus a majority who cannot access that language as easily

THE MYTH OF THE MANY LANGUAGES IN AFRICA

Most Africans speak several African languages, among them usually a regional one that could well be used as a language of instruction in higher education. Africans are multilingual in African languages (Prah and Brock-Utne 2009). A Tanzanian school inspector tells how he grew up with three different languages (Kimizi 2009). He would speak one of them with his father's clan, another and very different one with his mother's clan – they all lived in the same compound – and Kiswahili with his friends. He could not say which one was his mother-tongue or first language. Adama Ouane (2009), from Mali, the former director of the Unesco Institute of Lifelong Learning in Hamburg, also tells that he grew up with three different African languages simultaneously and, like Kimizi, cannot tell which one is his 'mother-tongue' or first language. Africans are now increasingly moving within and between countries and are as a result becoming more and more multilingual in African languages. Prah (2009a) found that in Nima, Ghana, 69% of those interviewed spoke at least four languages, 41% spoke five languages or more.

The Centre for Advanced Studies (Casas) is a Cape Town-based non-governmental organisation that promotes African languages all over the continent apart from the Arab-speaking regions. The scientific focus of Casas is linguistics. Its aim is to harmonize written forms of African languages, which, because of the heavy influence of western missionaries, have been written differently. Casas's research shows that 90% of the total population of sub-Saharan Africa could be grouped into 23 language clusters; in fact 12 to 15 such languages would suffice for 75% to 85% of the population (Prah 2005;

2009b; Brock-Utne and Mercer 2013).

If the international community were really serious in addressing the growing inequity in African education and designing quality education for all children in Africa, avoiding the language issue would not be possible. As Coombs (1985) noted, it is a politically explosive issue since it deals with a redistribution of power and learning opportunities between the elite and their children and the majority of Africans. Making larger African languages national languages and using them for communication in the mass media and for political discourse would also lessen the grip of donors on the development of Africa. This may be the reason why the question of what language should be used as the language of instruction is one of the least appreciated of all the major educational problems that come before international forums. But Africa as a continent cannot develop without the majority of its people being part of the development. No country has developed on the basis of a foreign language.

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