

TEACHING IN THE MOTHER TONGUE

IMPACT ON LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE)

Executive Summary

This policy brief provides an overview of language policies in education and the impact of policy practices, with a focus on early childhood education, as well as establishing Tusome Africa's language policy in the implementation of our Early Childhood education programs. The language environment in Uganda, like that of the greater East and South African regions, is rich and dynamic, with at least 42 live native languages spoken throughout the country. Overlaid on top of this is English, which was introduced to the country as a colonial language, and Swahili, which has spread from the shores of the Indian Ocean in the East African region.

While English has gained a strong foothold in Ugandan national institutions, its application and use as a language of instruction, particularly in primary school, remains a contentious issue. The Ugandan education policy requires that the mother tongue be used as the language of instruction for the first three years, with English taught as a subject. However, the policy also requires that in the 4th grade English is adopted as the language of instruction dropping the use of mother tongue altogether. The practice in schools is different with teachers gravitating to what they find to be effective in their classes, which depending on region varies. Balancing what parents and teachers consider to be quality education markers and what the ministry of education considers to be quality education is a delicate issue, as language plays a role in this. Policy shifts have occurred from time to time as the government attempts to find solutions that are acceptable to all parties involved in education while remaining pedagogically effective.

This policy brief advocates for the use of both English and mother tongue as the language of instruction for the simple reason that achieving a competitive advantage in the job market, which is currently dominated by English, necessitates strong foundations in language adoption and comprehension. While we agree that using mother tongue in our studies is important for preserving identity, culture, and native languages, there is also a need to balance what learners will need to interact and manage work at national institutions that all use English. We also believe that learners need more exposure to a language before it can be used as a teaching language. This is especially true in rural settings and public schools where learners largely use and are exposed to content only in their mother tongue. This potentially affects their ability to gain proficiency sufficient to understand instructions conducted in English.

Introduction

Mother tongue can be defined as a native language that is often spoken at home. In education, mother tongue may refer to the integration of a second language (mother tongue) into the classroom. This is normally the language a child speaks at home with their family and is the local dialect where the school is situated

In Uganda, research shows that children learn better when taught in their mother tongue but this system has its long-term consequences. The Ministry of Education and Sports advocates teaching in the mother tongue until the child reaches year three when English is introduced as a language of instruction. Children normally require 5-7 years of learning a second language before they can learn academic subjects in this language [1].

There are at least 43 living languages in Uganda. This alone poses a significant challenge to education policy, which is based on the use of mother tongue as a language of instruction in the early years. Luganda and Swahili are majorly used throughout the country as inter-ethnic communication languages. English is the dominant language in all formal communications in education, the judiciary, politics, and government [2].

China is largely cited as a success story in the use of Mandarin as a language of instruction. However, at the same time, China has invested in the teaching of both Mandarin and English. This means, that the investment into one language though targeting a big population had a favourable return on investment. However, in a multicultural society like Uganda, the investment required to convert every one of the 43 languages to a language of instruction is significant, with little ROI prospects given that some of the languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers and are not spoken anywhere else outside of Uganda. While preserving small and dying indigenous languages and national cohesion and integration may be at the centre of language policies in education [3] in this case, would it not make more sense to assist children in learning the language that they will need the most later in life to conduct business?

According to research, it takes about 12 years to fully develop first language competence, which means that children must continue building on the first language even after they begin learning a second language to be fully competent in the first [4]. The current policy only gives about 5-6 years of learning in the first language before fully switching to a 2nd language. At this point, children are not proficient in the mother language or the 2nd language in this case English. This, combined with a belief that English is a superior language, makes implementing the mother tongue policy for early childhood a significant challenge with a significant impact on the overall learning for children.

Case scenario: Iganga District Uganda

In Iganga District, there is a big disparity between public and private schools. For example, in most private schools, all children are expected to speak in English at school at all times. On the other hand, public school learners only encounter the language during English lessons.

Teaching resources are provided in English for both public and private schools, though public schools will also have some resources in local languages, which private schools will either lack or ignore. Also, children in private pre-primary schools start English learning at the age of 3 or 4 while those in government schools do so only at age 6 (when they join primary 1).

Role of mother tongue in child development.

It is also well known that a strong mother tongue foundation equips children with the skills they need to learn additional languages, allowing them to transfer their understanding of the structure of language to several new languages. The intuitive understanding of grammar that develops when children learn their first language can easily be passed on to other languages [5].

Language and mother tongue also play a huge role in the development of personal, social, and cultural identity. Children with a strong foundation in their first language often display a deeper understanding of themselves and their place within society, along with an increased sense of wellbeing and confidence. Naturally, this flows down into every aspect of their lives, including their academic achievement .

Why ECE should be delivered in mother tongue

Building a strong foundation in the first language is far more beneficial to second language learning than early or prolonged exposure to the additional language. According to studies, developing the first language is more efficient because the skills and concepts can then be easily transferred to the second. There are many benefits of teaching a child in their mother tongue in the early years of learning and below are some of the obvious ones.

- Mother tongue makes it easier for children to pick up and learn other languages.
- Mother-tongue develops a child's personal, social and cultural identity.
- Using mother tongue helps a child develop their critical thinking and literacy skills.
- Research shows that children learning in their mother tongue adopt a better understanding of the curriculum.
- Skills learned in the mother tongue do not have to be re-taught when the child transfers to a second language.
- Children learning in their mother tongue enjoy school more and learn faster due to feeling comfortable in their environment.

- Self-esteem is higher for children learning in their mother tongue.
- Parent-child interaction increases as the parent can assist with homework.

The use of learners' native languages in the classroom facilitates a smooth transition between home and school. It means that learners are more engaged in the learning process and that the development of basic literacy skills is accelerated. It also allows for greater flexibility, innovation, and creativity in teacher education. Using the learners' native language increases the likelihood of gaining the general community's support for the teaching/learning process and creates emotional stability, which translates to cognitive stability. In a nutshell, it improves learning outcomes [6].

Challenges faced by ECE centres in adopting English in rural areas

The limitations of fully adopting English as a medium of instruction in the early years' curriculum are broad and some are listed below;

- First, given the environment in which English is taught in rural Uganda, where proficiency in English is low for both learners and teachers, the language policy established by the national curriculum development centre is unlikely to be effective.
- Second, the prescribed guidelines fall short of what is required for a learner to comprehend English texts and access the curriculum in English.
- The recommended two years to acquire basic communicative skills and four years to acquire cognitive and academic language proficiency are only possible in well-resourced environments. Evidence shows that children in rural Ugandan schools cannot acquire these in three years only.
- There are broader issues to consider too. Learners need more time to be exposed to the language before they can learn through it. But children in government schools mostly use their mother tongue and are not exposed to media in English. Moreover, teachers in rural areas are not very proficient in English.

Second Language Instruction

In Early childhood education, second language instruction is usually done in English since it's the official and national language recognised in Uganda.

In the case of Iganga, most private schools have adopted English as the official language of instruction and this has created a big difference from children who study from public schools. The disparity is showcased in terms of thinking, creativity and self-confidence when these children have to interact with a working world outside of school.

Advantages of second language instruction in ECE

- Growth of a child's creativity and imagination. A child who's exposed to a second language during play is greatly stimulated to provoke his creativity and imagination thus having the ability to excel in life.
- Studying in a second language creates the opportunity for early diversity. Children get a chance to learn from differences instead of fearing them. An early exposure creates awareness in the child's mind to fit well in society. In the long run, this brings better opportunities both in school and to the outside world.
- Second language instruction improves a child's working memory. Learners express certain cognitive skills than those who study in the local language. Children quickly learn that objects have different names in another language and that their functions don't change.
- Children who learn in a second language gain confidence and a better understanding of both languages as they progress in their studies, gaining the ability to associate and communicate with people who do not speak their first language. Children who gain confidence over time can be encouraged to speak the second language without fear when they meet new people.

The disadvantages of second language instruction in ECE on the other hand are;

- It slows down language development in children. Teaching in a second language limits the number of words a child can learn in a given time. When a child is learning in a second language may cause misunderstanding and hinder language mastery.

- Culture confusion. When a teacher puts much effort into a second language, children may get confused by phonetics, phonology and morphology. For example, some Bantu speaking languages have more than five vowels in their written language and some vowels though similar to the English vowels take a different sound. This could easily confuse an ECE child who is just learning to identify the different vowels and sounds.

Our decision for ECE

Learning a child's mother tongue language during the first five years of life is one of the predictors of a child's later academic performance [7]. A child who does not have significant speech or language delays is more likely to struggle with reading throughout school. Children's communication skills enable them to relate to and reflect on their daily educational experiences, allowing them to broaden their horizons. Children's academic and intellectual development are hampered if they are unable to communicate effectively in school.

Children who speak one language at home and use a different language in school experience a linguistic barrier that displaces the home 'curriculum' leading to confusion and higher dropout rates in the first three years of primary school [8]. To guard against these potential risks for children especially in rural Uganda, Tusome Africa embraces teaching in mother tongue in ECE alongside a second language in this case English for reading and building proficiency in early years.

The benefits of using mother tongue as a medium of instruction outnumber those of using a foreign language as outlined below;

- Children are more likely to enrol and succeed in school.
- Parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children's learning.
- Rural children with less exposure to a dominant language stay in school longer and repeat grades less often.
- Children in multilingual education tend to develop better- critical thinking skills compared to their monolingual peers.

Conclusion

The teaching of children in the mother tongue alongside the second language allows the sounds and structures of the language to be transferred easily. The child builds on what is already known and understood. As language development progresses, concepts already known in the first language are more transferred into the second language. Transition to the second language can easily be done by using objects labelled in both the mother tongue and in the second language.

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