

Qualitative Research from a
University/Ministry Partnership:
Informing School Language Policy Decisions

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Introduction

Various researches on language in education have established that the use of the L1 as medium of instruction during one's early years of schooling, results in improved acquisition of knowledge by pupils (Andoh-Kumi, 1992; Fafunwa et al, 1989; Hakuta, 1986; Collison, 1972 & 1975). It has also been established that the use of the mother tongue as language of instruction is effective in helping with the acquisition of second languages.

Ghana uses English as the official language, and yet the majority of Ghanaians do not speak English as L1. Ghanaians learn English mostly in school as L2 or L3. English is the language of instruction in our schools. This use of English as medium for schoolwork demands a reasonable ability to understand, read and write it. Consequently, any Ghanaian who enters school has to learn English in addition to his/her own L1 (in some cases, to his/her L2 as well). In fact, the current national language education policy states that:

In the first three years of primary education, the Ghanaian language prevalent in the local area is to be used as the medium of instruction, whilst English is studied as a subject. From Primary Four, English replaces the Ghanaian language as medium of instruction, and the Ghanaian language is then treated as just another subject on the timetable.

The Ghanaian school child therefore uses his mother tongue (or L1) in the first three years of the primary school, and learns English as a subject. He then replaces the L1 with English as the medium of instruction from primary four to the University level. The Ghanaian school child may be said to follow a kind of transitional bilingual education programme. (The plan is to phase out the Ghanaian language as the *mainstream* or *majority* language, English develops. The child's first language is only an interim medium for

school instruction. The aim is fluency in English, the official language. Transitional programmes are often concerned with assimilation.) He is a dominant bilingual as well as a compound one. His bilingualism is exogenous and may be considered as subtractive. This may be disadvantageous since the devalued L1 is not very much used as medium of instruction and the L2 is acquired when the child has not had an appreciable progress in cognitive development in his L1.

These are the background knowledge and assumptions that we had as we went round to collect and analyse the data.

The IEQ 2 Multi-Site Study

The major goal of the IEQ 2 study is to inform the language policy dialogue and to improve bilingual practices in primary education. We have completed the data collection aspect of the first part of the Phase I of the study. Some preliminary analysis of the data has been done, and we have examined the range of ways in which the language policy is being implemented. We are identifying themes and patterns across the six sites.

We would like to share a few of our preliminary findings. They may appear to be very minor but they are, it seems to me, issues that should not be taken lightly if we are to ensure high quality teaching and learning in our schools.

- The data suggest that multilingualism and dealing with children (and teachers) in one school who speak different, mutually unintelligible languages is not solely an urban problem/issue, as is generally thought. In Alapa, for example, we find that as many as five different language groups are represented in the school.

- We anticipated finding policy implementation in four sites, one of which we expected to find “over-implementation” of the policy. In fact, we observed the policy being implemented in two sites only. The two sites where policy is being implemented are in rural areas, one in Volta region and the other in the Western. In these sites, teachers use the local language for instruction but have few local language materials to use.

Of the four non-implementation schools, two have a long-established school policies of Early English Medium; one has a staff of teachers who cannot speak or teach in the local language (and a ‘policy’ of Early English Medium). The fourth school, a rural school, has a recently-established policy of Early English Medium.

Teachers and Language Use

Teachers in P1-P4 at four sites (Nantwie, Alapa, Kapa and Noto) report using English for teaching subjects, giving exercises, and assigning homework. In the other two implementation schools (Awokya and Medofo) the Ghanaian language is used for instruction but English is used for exercises and homework in P1-P3. In Nantwie, where no teacher speaks the local language, the P1 teacher, who is the head of the school, is learning the local language, and sometimes uses the few words she has learnt in the language with her pupils.

In **Alapa**, the P1 teacher, who is non-native speaker of prevalent language, uses English for English and Maths, the rest of the subjects she teaches in the Ghanaian language. Pupils use slate and have no homework.

In **Awokya** the Ghanaian language is used for instruction in all subjects in P1-P3 but all exercises and homework are given in English. In P4, the teacher predominantly speaks

English but also uses Ghanaian language to teach Maths. All exercises and homework are given in English.

In **Medofo**, P1-P3 teachers use the Ghanaian language and English to teach Maths; others subjects (except English) are taught in the Ghanaian language. The P1 teacher also uses some Ghanaian language in teaching English. This teacher is the only one in the study to assign exercises in the Ghanaian language.

Half of the teachers across sites enjoy using Ghanaian language in their teaching. Half do not. The reasons vary.

When asked, the large majority of teachers across sites agree that pupils understand better and respond better when L1 (Ghanaian language) is used as MI. The exceptions are P1 and P3 teachers in Noto. One says she cannot respond since she does not speak the local language, the other says she does not like teaching in the local language.

The majority of children, however, preferred the Ghanaian language as language of instruction. Many of say: “ the local language – because I understand what’s going on.”

Community Attitudes

The six communities – including the two that are implementing the policy – support Early English Medium (non-implementation). In fact, a large majority of parents across sites favour Early English Medium for pupils in P1-P4. Reasons vary across and within sites.

Some of the reasons are:

“The purpose of schooling is to learn English.”

“They speak English in Parliament.”

“English can take children to places.”

“We have local at home; English should be the language for school. It’s an advantage for the child, they can then develop better fluency.”

“English is an international language.”

“When you go to school and at the end you do not understand English then it is useless.”

“I see the difference between those who are not literate and those who are literate so I want my child to learn English and become an important person in future.”

Remarks made by parents allude to certain perceptions that could account for their preferences or attitudes:

1. it is generally assumed that the MI contributes to competence in the language used as MI
2. children by their participation in the local community have adequate exposure to the local language but this is not necessarily the case where English is concerned.
3. it is assumed that competence in English contributes to learning and good education, and good education enhances status.
4. while the local language may not be spoken outside the area, English is a language of wider communication, as well as the official language.

However, there are some parents who prefer that both the local language and English be used as MI (i.e. bilingual education). They argue that “The two languages should go together . They should be able to read and write both languages.”

Conclusion

Capturing the diversity of ways in which the language policy is being implemented, interpreting the implications of bilingual teaching in these settings, and nurturing the collaborative partnerships between researchers, policy makers, and policy implementers, we shall make an important contribution to discussions about how best to improve education in Ghana.