

Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project

**TRANSFORMING LANGUAGE POLICY THROUGH
DIALOGUE AND SCHOOL-BASED RESEARCH**

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INTRODUCTION

Research has established that the use of L1 as medium of instruction (MOI) during one's early years of schooling results in improved and faster acquisition of knowledge by pupils. In addition, the use of the mother tongue as language of instruction is also effective in helping with the acquisition of second languages. (Fafunwa, et. al. 1989; Collison, 1972; Andoh-Kumi, 1992). To reap these benefits, many countries, including Ghana, have come out with national school language policies for basic schools that emphasise the use of mother tongue as MOI.

The current national language policy for schools in Ghana states:

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, while 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 OBJECTIVE OF THE IEQ II STUDY IN GHANA

Attempts to implement the Language Policy in Ghana have been beset with many problems.

Unsubstantiated statements are made regularly about the use of the Ghanaian language as medium of instruction in Grades 1 – 3 (English in Grades 4-6) and as a subject of study in Ghanaian schools. Significant amongst these is the belief that the policy itself largely accounts for the low level of literacy in English among pupils and students. Lack of resources, teacher preparedness, and other concerns confront schools' ability to carry out the policy as intended. Negative attitudes toward the use of Ghanaian languages as MOI also compound the problem.

A team of researchers in the Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) project set out in August 1999 to conduct a qualitative multi-site research on implementation of Language Policy in Ghanaian primary schools. The research was fashioned to describe the range of ways in which the language policy is being implemented in schools, and the consequences of the current state of implementation.

The major goal of the IEQ study is to transform the language policy and its implementation through dialogue and school-based research. The main research question was "How is the Language Policy being implemented in Primary Schools in Ghana?"

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The case study at the six different sites highlights a complexity in the implementation process of the school language policy in mother tongue education in Ghana. Some or most school heads, district officers and members of communities across Ghana are mandating and implementing English-only policies that oppose the national one.

The following findings were prominent:

- Stakeholders do not have copies of school language policy document. No one interviewed had a copy of the circular or the policy statement. Some were aware of the policy, but many could not state it.
- Some schools are using different language policies (English only, bilingual and Ghanaian language). Three out of five public schools in our study decided not to follow the language policy. They decided to use English as medium of instruction (MOI) from Grade 1.
- There is complete lack of textbooks or other curriculum materials written in Ghanaian languages. All subjects to be taught using the Ghanaian language have their texts written in English with the exception of Ghanaian Language supplementary readers.
- Teachers who are non-speakers of or non-literate in particular Ghanaian language are posted to areas where such languages are predominant.
- Most teachers have never received any in-service training in the area of Ghanaian language as a subject and as medium of instruction.
- Majority of pupils said they preferred to be taught in English because this is the language that would help them to get ahead in the world; however our classroom observations revealed that pupils participated more actively when the Ghanaian language was used.
- Teachers are aware that pupils understand better when they use the local language in their lessons, but most of them use English as medium of instruction.
- Generally, parents, headteachers, teachers, supervisors and community members preferred instruction in English with some parents and community members rooting for bilingual approach (use of both English and Ghanaian Language).
- Some teachers in P4 (the transitional grade of English) were still using the local language to explain some spots of their lessons.
- There was the situation of a site that was using a Ghanaian Language, which was not the predominant language of the area. The predominant language of the area is not one of the officially approved Ghanaian Languages for instruction.
- The issue of multi-language groups in schools is not necessarily an urban phenomenon. These were observed even at the rural sites.
- There were no records pointing to the monitoring of the policy. Subsequently there was no evidence of sanctions against schools that did not implement the policy.

These findings have implications for the review of the current Language Policy.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR POLICY DIALOGUE AND FORMULATION¹

Informing policy dialogue with research is a key component of Improving Educational Quality Research studies; it is therefore important to discuss the implications of the research findings for policy dialogue and formulation at the school, community, district and national levels:

1. LANGUAGE POLICY DOCUMENT DISSEMINATION

Stakeholders do not have a copy of the school language policy document. None of the people interviewed had a copy of the circular or of the policy statement. Although some of the supervisors and headteachers generally are aware of the policy, they could not state it. The implication is that inadequate knowledge of the policy may lead some districts, schools and communities to ignore the policy. It may also be responsible for the general public's negative attitude towards the policy as the findings indicate.

There are several options for policymakers to consider. First, the current practice of non-dissemination can be continued; the expected outcomes are that districts, communities, and schools will continue to ignore the policy, due in part, to lack of information and attitudes towards it will continue to be negative.

Another option is that the policy document could be disseminated widely, as with the textbook policy at all levels of the system and to all stakeholders. It could be sent round to supervisors as a circular, continue to be included in the curriculum of Teacher Training Colleges and disseminated through mass media. In this way, all stakeholders will have the same information about the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service regarding language of instruction in primary education.

Alternatively, the policy document could be disseminated more narrowly to select audiences. For example, a circular could be sent to District Education Offices and from there to the schools. If this option is chosen, some stakeholders such as community members and parents are less likely to be fully aware of the policy and their attitudes may continue to be negative.

Whichever option is chosen, it is recommended that a set of guidelines for policy implementation be developed to guide educators at all levels and help them to know what to expect.

¹ This section is based on Chapter 8 of *Implementation of the School Language Policy in Ghana: Interim Report* (June 2000), by Joe Dzinyela and Shirley Miske.

2. NATIONAL OR DECENTRALIZED POLICY

Three out of five public schools in the study have an English-only policy. Although we will not make generalisations for the entire country based on our six sites, information from other projects and anecdotal evidence suggest that non-implementation may not be unusual. Hence, decision-making on language policy has been decentralized in practice. The present decentralized arrangement – the “loose coupling” of national policy and local practice – can be continued. The results that will emanate from such a practice will be similar to what is being experienced now.

Alternatively, the Ministry of Education can adopt a language policy with guidelines and a comprehensive strategy for implementing and monitoring the policy. In that way the policy can be implemented nation-wide.

3. RESOURCES AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Options suggested in this section relate to textbooks and school materials, teachers and Circuit Supervisors.

- (a) Textbooks and Materials. In order to implement the policy, Ghanaian language textbooks and materials must be available; content area textbooks, such as Mathematics books, must be available in Ghanaian languages so that the local language can truly be used to teach the subjects. The study revealed a complete lack of textbooks in Ghanaian Languages. Hence it could be said that currently it is not possible to carry out the language policy, because resources do not exist to support it.

If relevant teaching and learning materials are not made available in sufficient quantities, non-implementation or inadequate implementation of the policy can be expected to continue.

Policy options include workshops on and resources for teacher-made materials. Speed-up publication of MOE Ghanaian language materials must be accompanied by in-service training.

- (b) Teachers:

- (i) Teacher Development: In one of the schools studied, no teacher spoke the predominant language of the area. As a result, Ghanaian language was used neither as medium of instruction nor taught as a subject from P1 to P6. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this situation may not be uncommon in other schools in the country. In such schools, it is not possible to implement the policy. This situation calls for a

critical look at posting and transfer practices for new and experienced, trained and untrained teachers.

- (ii) **Teacher Preparation:** Successful implementation of the Language Policy requires adequate teacher preparation. It has been discovered in our study that most of the teachers were not trained to use the local language as medium of instruction. Such teachers may not have the confidence to teach the Ghanaian Language.

One way of achieving the goal of the language policy is that methodology for using Ghanaian Language as medium of instruction and teaching Ghanaian Language as a subject must receive more attention in the Teacher Training Colleges. This problem is being addressed by the GTZ² initiative. Other areas that deserve more attention in Teacher Training programme include methodology of teaching English as a subject and methodology of using English as medium of instruction for smooth transition from L1 to L2 as MOI.

Training Colleges need to be well equipped with the needed facilities to enable them face the challenge.

Some limited evidence in the study suggests that some Training Colleges in the past did not adhere strictly to the requirements on teaching the Ghanaian languages. It was reported that students were permitted for one reason or another to skip the Ghanaian language requirements. It implies that the products of those colleges did not acquire the competency for using the Ghanaian languages as MOI. It has affected the implementation of the policy adversely.

- (iii) **In-Service Training:** The study revealed that most teachers had never received any in-service training in the area of Ghanaian language as a subject and medium of instruction. Many teachers in the study had received no training in using Ghanaian language as MOI in Teacher Training Colleges either. Some expressed discomfort even in teaching Ghanaian language as a subject. This implies that the support that teachers need to raise the level of their competency in the use of and the teaching of Ghanaian language is lacking.

By providing the teachers with the needed support, their level of competency will be raised and they will feel more comfortable to use the language as medium of instruction and to teach it effectively as a subject.

² GTZ is Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Technical Corporation).

4. ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

Across sites, the large majority of pupils prefer to ask and answer questions and to be taught in the local language because they understand what goes on. Despite pupils' and teachers' awareness that pupils understand better when teachers use local language for instruction, most pupils continue to hear the strong message from teachers and parents that English is preferable, because it is the language of high status that symbolises upward mobility.

Not only did teachers and parents prefer English instruction, but the study also revealed the negative attitude of some teachers, supervisors, parents and community members towards the language policy. The implication is that the kind of attitude exhibited by a section of stakeholders described above would not encourage effective implementation of the language policy. A change of attitude cannot be mandated or legislated; but educating these stakeholders and the rest of the public to raise their level of awareness of the sound rationale behind the policy and the benefits to be derived from it is an important consideration.

5. LANGUAGE POLICY ASSUMPTIONS

- (a) One of the assumptions of the Language Policy is that by the end of the third year of primary education, pupils would be proficient enough in English to be able to understand lessons taught when English is substituted for the local language as medium of instruction from P4.

According to research, it appears the three-year period for use of the local language as medium of instruction at the primary level is too short for the development of oral proficiency and cognitive faculties that would enable pupils to switch to English as L2 medium of instruction.

Policy options include changing the policy to delay the transition from the local language to English as medium of instruction until a later grade when the children are ready for it. Also, the change from the local language to English as medium of instruction could be phased in as a gradual process, with percentages of language use assigned to different grades. Percentages should be designated according to research studies and guidelines established in successful mother tongue education programmes.

- (b) The policy calls for the use of the predominant Ghanaian Language of the area as medium of instruction in P1 – P3. This is problematic in communities where children are fluent in a predominant local language, which is not officially sponsored and may not have any orthography, e.g. Ahanta being used as official language in Awocha – speaking area.

This complex reality of Ghana needs to be acknowledged in the policy and/or policy guidelines. Increasing numbers of languages not yet officially sponsored in Ghana do have a developed orthography; materials can be developed locally so that pupils can first become literate in their home language and then shift to English. Becoming fluent first in one's own language and then learning to become literate in a second language establishes many of the dynamics of the reading process for children.

- (c) The presence of multiple-language classrooms may not be primarily an urban phenomenon as has been assumed, but also in rural areas. It was observed in some school settings that the pupils come from many different language groups that speak several mutually unintelligible languages without the benefit of commonly understood Ghanaian Language. Nevertheless, according to the policy, individual pupils who do not speak these languages must still learn in them. It implies that the selection of one local language to serve as medium of instruction places some pupils at a disadvantage. The challenges of this for pupils and for teachers need to be explored.

In communities (e.g. in metropolitan areas) where enrolment would allow, earmarking schools to serve particular language groups has been discussed as one solution. But implementation of this option has its own implications in terms of costs to individuals and the public. An in-depth study of using a Ghanaian language as medium of instruction in multilingual settings - rural and urban - needs to be conducted if the policy is to be effectively implemented at those centres.

6. POLICY MONITORING

The study found no evidence of sanctions against schools and education officers that did not implement the policy. Non-monitoring of the implementation of the policy would leave schools and education officers free to decide on their own mode of implementation. Maintaining the status quo is one policy option. Monitoring the language policy through supervisors who do not consistently support (and sometimes staunchly oppose) implementation³ of the national policy will support the current decentralised approach discussed above. There are other options also. One is to develop a set of incentives to implement the policy, i.e. rewarding those who implement it well. Another is to develop a plan that acknowledges the present range of (non-) implementation and establishes a timeline and resources allocation plan for effective implementation. Increased monitoring is another possibility, e.g. send out guidelines with incentives and/or sanctions to Assistant Directors of Education and Circuit Supervisors. Beyond this, the task of monitoring could be assigned to a new

³ One IEQ researcher discovered (not in our Study) that a district director of education had sent a circular to all schools in his district mandating Early English medium.

unit established in the Ministry that would be responsible for monitoring language policy implementation.

7. CONTEXTUAL SUPPORT FOR LANGUAGE IMPLEMENTATION

(a) Policy Guidelines

If the policy document is disseminated widely, issuing succinct statements of the rationale behind the policy and guidelines that acknowledge current realities and problems, it could bolster implementation. Guidelines that will help teachers transfer learning from L1 to L2, that is, from the local language to English are also needed.

(b) Development Partnership/MOE Projects and Language Policy Implementation

Intervention programmes between most development partners and the Ministry of Education to improve the quality of education in Ghana seem to be concentrating on subjects such as English and Mathematics. If these partnership programmes were to include effective implementation of the Ghanaian Language aspect of the Language Policy, it would serve as an important message to supervisors, teachers, parents and communities about the use of Ghanaian language in primary school and expectations of policy implementation.

DIALOGUE WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Since February 2000, IEQ researchers have engaged various stakeholders in a number of dialogues.

The researchers had dialogue with Thematic Group on Teaching and Learning. The group is made up of development partners and Ghanaian stakeholders from the MOE and the GES. Concerns expressed included the inavailability of teaching/learning materials in the schools, negative attitudes and beliefs, too early transition from L1 to L2 medium of instruction and problems associated with multilingualism. At one of such Thematic Group meetings, the Chairman for Parliamentary Select Committee on Education asked that the research findings on language policy be made available to Parliamentary Committee on Education for discussion and consideration.

Research Advisory Committee (RAC) for IEQ2 was one of the groups the researchers shared their research findings with. The committee is made up of representatives from Universities, Ministry of Education, Ghana Education Service (GES), headteachers, teachers, School Management Committees and USAID. RAC observed that:

- (i) Lack of monitoring hindered the implementation of policy in the classroom,
- (ii) There was the need to educate both teachers and parents on the rationale behind the institution of the language policy. This would make people to understand and support the policy, and
- (iii) Problems of lack of teachers to teach Ghanaian Language and use it as MOI, and lack of textbooks on the various subjects were indications of lack of inadequate preparation before the implementation of the policy

The general feeling of the Committee was that the implementation of the policy could be suspended until enough preparation was made.

Other stakeholders we dialogued with included participants in National Teacher Education Forum organised at the University College of Education, Winneba in August 2000, and National Forum on Education Development organized in Accra in September 2000. They expressed unpreparedness of the educational system to implement the language policy, and suggested revision of the Teacher Education programme to support the implementation of the policy.

Other groups of stakeholders the research team plans to have dialogue with are parents and communities, low level policy-makers who make school policies, (e.g. District Directors of Education, Supervisors, Headteachers and teachers), Conference of Directors of Education, Conference of Principals of Teacher Training Colleges and top officials from the MOE and the GES.

A national seminar on language policy will be organized by IEQ2 team in June 2001. The main purpose of the national seminar is to have dialogue with stakeholders in education.

CONCLUSION

For successful implementation of the Language Policy for primary schools in Ghana it is important that elements such as the quality and availability of teachers and educational materials, the curriculum and teaching methods are used. Problems of overly loose interpretation of policies and the selection of language of instruction (in multilingual setting) can be avoided when objectives are clearly defined and careful linguistic planning is carried out.

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