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## SWINGS IN SCHOOL LANGUAGE POLICIES: THE CASE OF GHANA

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**ABSTRACT:** *Ghana is a highly multilingual country with over forty indigenous languages spoken within its borders. This paper analysis the extent to which the complexities of this multilingual nature of the country has affected school language policies that have been implemented in the country by various governments. Instead of discussing such policies in a chronological order, the paper reveals their fluctuating nature by categorising them. The mode of implementation of the various policies, the rationales provided by various governments in changing existing policies, and the eventual effects of the policies on student learning have all been discussed. Contrasting the Ghanaian situation with the US, the paper brings out differences in the way school language policies have been enacted, in the hope that policy makers in Ghana could be exposed to other approaches to school language policy enactments. The paper concludes by providing suggestions towards improving how school language policies could be enacted and implemented in Ghana.*

**KEY WORDS:** School language policy, Immersion policies, Mother tongue policies, Early exit transitional bilingual policies, National Literacy Acceleration Program (NALAP).

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### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Language is a medium of communication, business, and scientific development. Because of this important role of language, the language of education of any country is a vital factor in national development. Unfortunately for varied reasons, many African countries have not been able to pursue a consistent language policy. For instance, Ghana, a country with an estimated population of about 26 million, at the time of writing, is a highly multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country with over forty mutually unintelligible indigenous languages spoken within her borders (Edward, 1983; Dakubu, 1988 and Andoh-Kumi, 2000). Edward (1983) lists forty-four unintelligible indigenous languages in Ghana, Dakubu (1988) puts the figure between forty-five and fifty and Andoh-Kumi (2000) mention seventy. In addition, we have English, the language of our colonizers, which has become our lingua franca. This linguistic fragmentation has, from time immemorial, has made school language policy formulation and implementation very complex and difficult.

This paper traces school language policies enacted and implemented in Ghana (formerly Gold Coast) since the introduction of formal education in the country. It opens with a brief historical account of each of the policies. After that an analysis of the manner in which the various policies were enacted is presented followed by the rationale provided by policy makers for each of the various policies. Next, the effect of the various policies on student achievement is discussed. The paper ends with the discussion of the similarities and differences between what has prevailed in Ghana and the US.

## **SCHOOL LANGUAGE POLICIES ENACTED AND IMPLEMENTED IN GHANA**

The period from 1629 marked the arrival of European merchants; Portuguese, Dutch, Danish and English on the coast of Ghana. Formal education was introduced to Ghana by these merchants through schools they established in the castles they built. The history of education in Ghana since then reveals the enactment and implementation of multilingual policies, with a big swing between complete immersion policies and early exit transitional bilingual policies in our schools, and a true mother tongue policy between these two extremes.

### ***The immersion policies implemented in Ghana***

The first total immersion policy was implemented between 1629 and 1925 when the castle schools dominated. The castle schools were initially meant to train clerks for the European merchants in order to facilitate their business. Consequently, depending on the region where the various merchants operated, the language of instruction was the language of the merchants and no consistent streamlining was done. Then after independence in 1957, a structured form of immersion policy, which uses children's first language only minimally, was enacted and implemented. This time, because of the elevation of English language as the national language under earlier British rule, an all-English school language policy, with a small window for the possible use of the Ghanaian languages only in the first year, was implanted. The policy that was implemented stated that,

English language is to be the language of education from the first year of schooling (i.e., from Primary one). Ghanaian language, if it became necessary, can however be used as the medium of instruction only in the first year of the primary school.

Thus, though majority of Ghanaian school children were encountering English for the first time in school, they were immersed in an all-English medium of instruction right from the first grade.

A second attempt at enacting an English-immersion policy occurred in 2003 when the Government suspended the early exit mother tongue policy that had been on paper since the 1970s. This action followed the national forum organized by the Improving Educational Quality project (IEQ 2/Ghana) in 2001 at which the findings of the IEQ2 project were shared and which the Minister of education attended. The IEQ 2 project found that the then transitional policy was not being implemented in most schools in Ghana and that many schools had evolved their own policies. In addition, there were no textbooks in the Ghanaian languages for subjects like mathematics, science and social studies to support schools that were implementing the policy. And worse of it all, assessment of primary school students showed that children from the less resourced schools that implemented the transitional policy performed least. It is unclear whether these findings were solely responsible for the suspension of the policy. However reasons for this change included; improving Ghanaian students' proficiency in English language to make it possible for schools to be competitive globally; the need to bridge the gap between the private school and the public schools, and the linguistic diversity of Ghanaian schools. This decision was fiercely debated by many Ghanaian in the media and government was compelled to set up a Review Committee which ended up recommending that government should go back to a policy that gave prominence to the use of Ghanaian languages.

***The only mother tongue policy implemented in Ghana***

The only true mother tongue education policy was implemented by the early Christian missionaries. The arrival of these missionaries in the educational scene in the Ghana (then Gold Coast) was what a shift from the initial large number of European languages used for instruction in the castle schools. These missionaries settled at different regions of the then Gold Coast and began using the indigenous languages of the areas where they operated as media of instruction. For instance, in Twi and Ga speaking areas, the Bessel missionaries used Twi and Ga while the Bremen missionaries who settled in the Volta region used Ewe. The Wesleyan missionaries who settled in the Fanteland initially used English as the language of instruction before changing to Fante about 50 years later.

***The early exit transitional bilingual policies implemented in Ghana***

The first early exit transitional bilingual policy was enacted by the British Government soon after taking control of all schools when Guggisberg became Governor of the then Gold Coast from 1919. Guggisberg put in place, an Education Ordinance, in 1925, which made Ghanaian languages, Twi, Fante, Ewe and Ga to be precise, the media of instruction at the lower primary level (i.e., the first three years of primary education) and English studied as a subject. From the upper primary level the Ghanaian languages and English switched roles. In addition, Twi and Fante became school certificate subjects at the secondary school level in the 1930/31 academic year; Ga in 1933/34 and Ewe in 1934/35. From 1937/38 a pass in a Ghanaian language at the secondary school level was compulsory for admission to the Teacher training Colleges. At the teachers' bar examinations a person was examined in his own language at the Part One, and a second language at the Part Two. It was this policy that was implemented until it was changed when Ghana gained independence in 1957. Though independence brought in Ghana, several new policy directions, when it came to the school language policy virtually little changed except that the number of Ghanaian languages to be used in school increased from the original four (listed earlier in this section) to eleven that were sponsored by the then Bureau of Ghana Languages that was set up. A similar type of policy was implemented again in Ghana from 1970 following problems with the 1957 immersion policy. The policy stated that,

“it is now Government policy that the main Ghanaian languages at present provided for in the curricular of primary and middle schools be used as the medium of instruction in the first three years of the primary school course and, where the subject makes it possible, in the next three years as well. In the upper primary, or higher classes where English is the teaching medium, the appropriate Ghanaian language(s) will be properly taught as a school subject” (Ghana Country Paper, 1996, p.10).

This policy followed the recommendation of the Kwapong Education review committee set up in 1967. According to the 1996 Ghana Country Paper, “in addition, the Minister of Education announced in November 1970 that every pupil was to learn an approved second Ghanaian language from the beginning of 1971” (p.10). It was this policy that was implemented by the Acheampong Government in 1974 and reiterated during Ghana's educational reform of 1987. The 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 onwards, English replaces the Ghanaian language as the medium of instruction and the Ghanaian language becomes another subject on the time table” (Ministry of Education. 1999 cited in Mfum-Mensah, 2005; Andoh-Kumi, 2000).

Though it was suspended in 2002, an educational review committee that was set up to review the policy and its effect recommended that it be put back. The argument was that children in the early grade levels learn better and can participate more in class activities more efficiently if instruction is in the language they understand.

Consequently, using experiences from South African and other African countries and in line with the Ministry of Education’s (MOE’s) 2003 – 2015 Strategic Plan, a new early exit bilingual policy initiative called National Literacy Accelerated Program (NALAP) was developed in 2007 and launched nationwide in November 2009 with USAID support (Owu-Ewie, 2013, Lehrerr, 2009). The launching followed work by a National Literacy Task Force (NLTF) formed by Ghana’s MOE) in June 2006 to develop and implement NALAP. The aim of NALAP was to ensure public support, the provision of quality literacy materials, and effective instruction from kindergarten to grade three to help children read and write in their mother tongue and in English. In the implementation of NALAP, as Leherr (2009) puts it,

“children learn to read in their mother tongue (L1) and also learn to speak English (L2), with a framework based on GES Language and Literacy Standards and Milestones. The instructional approach is supported by a comprehensive and high quality set of instructional materials, developed in all 11 Ghanaian languages of instruction and including both teacher and learner materials” (p. i).

Thus, by concentrating efforts in the early grade levels with the assumption that the medium of instruction (MOI) from grade four, it could be argued that NALAP is essentially an early exit transitional bilingual programme. The main difference between NALAP and the earlier “early exit’ language of education policy in Ghana was that in the 1970 policy, textbooks used in the lower primary schools were not written in the Ghanaian languages but in English. Teachers were therefore constrained when they were confronted with effectively translating the textbooks written in English, on the spot, into local languages when children did not understand. In addition, school assessments were mostly done in English language even in schools that implemented the then language policy (see Amissah et al., 2001). This was what compelled Wilmot (2002) to conclude that “perhaps medium of instruction is only one of the variables that affect quality of education. A conducive environment, availability of resources, and assessment practices are all important in this respect” (p. 13). Owu-Ewie (2103) Hartwell (2010) to the effect that in the implementation of NALAP, on the other hand, four main components were built in with the aim of overcoming these deficiencies. They were, Public advocacy, Instructional design including materials development, as well as pre- and in-service teacher training, Policy dialogue and research, and Monitoring and programme evaluation.

### **MODE OF ENACTMENT OF THE VARIOUS SCHOOL LANGUAGE POLICIES**

In terms of the mode of enactment, it is important to note that because the initial castle schools were not meant for the education of general populace, Gold Coasters were not involved in deciding what the language of instruction was to be. Not even the chiefs who benefited could exert any change because the education of their royals was a favor they received from the merchants. In the same way, the decision to implement a mother tongue education policy by the missionaries was arrived without the active involvement of the citizens.

The 1925 Education Ordinance, however, was enacted differently. The work of a number of bodies informed this ordinance. Notable among these was the Phelps-Stokes Commission on which the renowned Ghanaian Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey served. There was also the work of Gold Coast Colony's Board of Education, established on which opinion leaders like Nana Sir Ofori-Atta I, the then paramount chief of the Akyem traditional area. For instance, according to Foster (1965) the Phelps-Stokes commission had as far as 1920 recommended the use of local languages in schools. Thus, the use of findings from groups on which local citizens served marked one of the earliest attempts to involve some of the elite locals in decisions of language policy.

The 1957, 1970 and 1974 policies were in a similar way preceded by the formation of committees of enquires to look into the educational needs of the country. For instance, in 1963 a committee, the Bannerman Committee, was set up by the government to review pre-university education in Ghana. Unfortunately the recommendations of this committee were not implemented so after the overthrow of Nkrumah's government, the Kwapong committee was set in 1967 with a similar mandate. It was the recommendation of the Kwapong committee that shaped the 1970 policy while the 1974 policy was based on recommendations from the Dzobo Committee (named after the chairpersons). It was these two committees that recommended the use of Ghanaian languages "as an initiative for promoting Ghanaian identity formation" (Mfum-Mensah, 2005, p.76).

The education review committees formed after independence had full Ghanaian membership. Each of them received reactions from the general Ghanaian populace and conductive numerous school visits to ascertain what prevailed on the ground. Their work indicates the extent to which Ghanaians were involved in decisions about school language policy after independence. The only unfortunate thing was that the first post-independence Government ignored recommendations of the Bannerman committee and maintained the seemingly all-English medium of instruction.

### **RATIONALE/ARGUMENTS THAT HAVE SHAPED VARIOUS POLICY DIRECTIONS**

The rationale for the immersion policies initially implemented in the castles can be understood by critically analyzing the purpose of education during that period. As already mentioned the castle schools were initially meant to train clerks for the European merchants in order to facilitate their business. As a result, no attempt was made to use any of the indigenous languages as school language because the European merchants felt using the native languages in school

“would not have had any significant impact on their trading activities” (Ghana Country Paper, 1996, p. 5).

When the missionaries came into the scene, they decided to use the language of the people because they felt that such usage will facilitate the propagation of the Christian message faster. These missionaries figured that it was easier, less time consuming and economically cheaper for them to learn the local languages than teaching the entire population their various European languages. As the 1996 Ghana Country Paper puts it, “their primary objective [of the Basel and Bremen missionaries was] to establish a church which was very close to the culture of the people. . . [so] they placed great emphasis on the use of the Ghanaian languages” (p.5). Like the European merchants this decision was purely a cultural capital issue. That is, in both cases the underlying principle was the perceived usefulness or otherwise of the Ghanaian languages for the purposes of their trade or for the propagation of the Gospel.

When the British took control of the schools in 1919 Governor Guggisberg maintained that education should not denationalize the recipients but that a good marriage between the national culture and the best attributes of Western civilization was necessary; hence the 1925 Education Ordinance which he put in place. As already mentioned it was this ordinance that brought the implementation of the first early exit bilingual education policy in the then Gold Coast. It is important to note that the early exit nature of this policy (i.e. the transition to an English medium after grade three) also succeeded in raising the status of English in the then Gold Coast above all other Ghanaian languages and paved the way for English to become the lingua franca of the country both internally and externally.

A number of reasons were given for the review of the 1925 Ordinance that promoted the use of Ghanaian languages as media of instruction at the time of independence. The first of these was the status issue mentioned in the previous paragraph; many of the elite politicians in Ghana argued that the 1925 policy was a design by the British to give a substandard education to the Ghanaians (see McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975; Folson, 1995). They therefore advocated for an all English medium. Another reason given for the 1957 policy shift was that the all-English medium of instruction would “increase the competence and proficiency of children in English” (p.8). This reason appealing to many especially because English had become the country’s lingua franca. In addition, the linguistic fragmentation of the country provided a political platform for keeping English as a school language and a national language a means of national integration and for avoiding anointing one native language and culture as the dominant one nationally. Some intellectuals argued that using Ghanaian language as medium of instruction and lingua franca will cause disunity among the diverse ethnic groups in the country (see Folson, 1995)

The Kwapong Committee of 1967 based their recommendation on their observation that “the general pattern in the elementary schools was that Ghanaian language was used as medium of instruction for the first year . . . and in many localities the local language was used throughout the ten-year elementary course” (Ghana Country Paper, 1996, p. 9). When this committee’s work was taken into consideration to change the policy in 1970 the reason given was that, “children learn more easily in their mother tongue and are readily able to express their ideas and reactions

in that language” (Ghana Country Paper, 1996, p. 9). This same rationale was given in support of the refinement of the 1970 policy in 1974, following the work of the Dzobo Committee. Thus, it was assumed that, with the use of mother tongue in teaching at the early stages, children can understand and participate in their lessons better. It was also assumed that this, in turn, will lead to improved cognitive development and therefore higher performance in school subjects. This rationale is supported by experiences in Africa and many parts of the world (Andoh-Kumi, 1992; Fafunwa, et. al, 1989; Hakuta, 1986; Bamgbose, 1984; Collison, 1972). The 1970-78 Ife project of Nigeria, for example, has shown that if the medium of instruction at the early stages is the language of the learner understands very well, (s)he can understand instructions and fully participate in the educational process.

### **EFFECTS OF THE VARIOUS POLICIES ON STUDENT OUTCOMES**

Literature available on school language policies in the Gold Coast (i.e. Ghana before 1957) is silent on the effects such policies had on student achievement. There is evidence to support the fact that during the independence struggles of the 1950s, arguments given were not based on any logical analysis of Guggisberg’s 1925 policy that gave some prominence to the use of Ghanaian languages as languages of instruction (see Foster, 1965 cited in Mfum-Mensah, 2005, Shillington, 1992; Ghana Country Paper, 1996). Foster (1965) for instance argues that those who supported a change of policy to an English immersion argued that choosing one of the indigenous languages was not going to augur well for the unity of the countries while Shillington (1992) have indicated that people like Nkrumah, who later became Ghana’s first president, had argued that using English was going to enhance the country’s development efforts better than the use of any of the indigenous languages.

Available literature indicates that, soon after independence it was realized that Ghana’s the first post-independence Government’s stated hope that the shift of emphasis from the initial use of Ghanaian languages as media of instruction to an all-English medium would increase the competence and proficiency of children in English did not materialize (see the Ghana Country Paper, 1999). In 1963, in particular, there was massive failure in English at the School Certificate Examinations (i.e. the GCE “O” level examinations). It was this massive failure that prompted the then Government to set up the Banner Committee to review pre-university education in Ghana that year. Prior to this, a pass in English was one of the conditions necessary for the award of the school certificate. The Bannerman committee recommended a consideration of the use of Ghanaian languages as mediums of instruction in the primary school. Unfortunately, this recommendation was not accepted by the then government but circumvented the problem by making it a policy that a pass in English should not be a major factor in the award of the GCE “O” level Certificate from that year. In addition, Ghanaian languages ceased to count for certification at the teacher training colleges and so many of such institutions stopped teaching it. Using Bourdieu (1973)’s theory of cultural reproduction and social reproduction, I argue that the mass failure of secondary students in 1963 was to be expected since majority of Ghanaian parents, who were illiterate, by their education, did not have high human capital which they could use to give their children false start to schooling under this new policy. The immediate post-independence school language policy, thus, had the potential of causing the authentic beginners in school to be left behind, as opportunities for them to succeed were

generally denied them by the school language right from the first-grade. That policy only favored children who were privileged with the available of the needed human capital at home to support their learning in English.

From 1974 when the change to a Ghanaian language policy was put in place, teacher training colleges were grouped into two. Those in Group B were taught one Ghanaian language in depth, and were externally examined in it as part of their certification. Products of this group were posted to teach the Ghanaian language as a subject in the Junior Secondary Schools. Colleges in Group A, on the other hand, were to give their students enough training in the use of Ghanaian languages as medium of instruction in the primary schools. The Educational Reform of 1987 maintained this policy. It even made Ghanaian language a compulsory subject up to the senior secondary level. The first batch of high school students wrote the new national examination, Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSSCE), in 1993. Unfortunately, this first batch of students in the new reform performed poorly at the national level. Many people blamed the poor performance of students at the first national examination following that reform on the policy of using Ghanaian language as medium of instruction in the first three years of school (see the 1996 Ghana Country Paper, p13). That year, the Ministry of Education decided that Ghanaian language should no longer be compulsory at the senior secondary level. Again, this decision might have been influenced by the mass failure at the national examination that year, especially the abysmal performance in English. The adjustment in policy by the government also resulted in the teacher training colleges in the country being made to offer two Ghanaian languages from which pre-service teachers selected any one for study during the first two years. In addition, a pass in Ghanaian language at the SSSCE was removed from the requirements for admission into the teacher training colleges.

The suspension of this policy in 2002 that led to the putting in place of NALAP was also fraught with similar problems. Not having textbooks written in the various Ghanaian languages in an educational system in which assessment was mostly done in English as already discussed, caused many to interpret the apparent lack of good performance of Ghanaian children who mostly came from schools that implemented the school language as failure. I argue that in the schools that implemented the school language policy, the lack of 'good' performance among majority of children to be anticipated since majority of parents of these children, who were illiterate, by their education, did not have high human capital which they could use to support their children's learning at home. Thus, as Wilmot & Wilmot (2013) argues, again, the manner in which schools were managed only privileged the few children who had available to them the needed human capital at home to support their learning in English.

## **COMPARING THE GHANAIAN SITUATION TO THE US SITUATION**

As has been discussed above, when formal education was introduced in the Gold Coast, now Ghana, by the European merchants the rationale for not using the indigenous languages was that it was not going to enhance their trading activities in any way (see the Ghana Country Paper, 1996, p. 5). This rationale is obviously different from the rationale given for not using the languages of the indigenes in America (i.e. the Native Americans) in the off-reservation boarding

schools around the 1870s. In the case of the latter, it is clear that the Native American languages were considered as barbarous dialects (see Indian Peace Commission, 1868 cited in Wiese & Garcia, 1998; Smith, 1999) and there was a conscious effort to get rid of those indigenous languages completely. Smith (1999) even argues that in an attempt to exterminate American Indian languages, “students were punished and humiliated for speaking their native languages as part of a general campaign to wipe out every vestige of their Indian-ness” (p. 269). This attitude of the British government in America was again different from what happened in the Gold Coast when the British took over the educational system there. Unlike what prevailed in America where the locals were completely immersed in English language, in the Gold Coast some prominence was given to the use of the local languages (see the Ghana Country Paper, 1996).

Another difference in the manner in which school language policies have been enacted in the US and Gold Coast/Ghana can be seen in the populations targeted in the policies. Where as in the Gold Coast, now Ghana, the bilingual policies of 1925 and 1974 were targeted at the general population, available literature indicates that in the US, the various Bilingual Education Acts were targeted only at the non-English speaking minority populations many of whom are immigrants (see Edwards, Fear & Gallego, 1995; Crawford, 1998).

A third difference can be seen in events that lead to the enacted of the various policies. In the US, Edwards et al (1995) give an account of several legal battles that were initiated by African American and Hispanic parents to force school districts to afford their children the civil right to learn their own languages. Battles like these were fought in Ghana. Instead, as discussed earlier in this paper, Ghanaians have been known to compel their governments to consider possible reviews of their educational system any time they perceived student performance at their national examination to be falling below appreciable standards.

The manner in which the various policies were enacted also provides another difference. Available literature indicates that the average American citizen participated by casting a vote for the various Bilingual Education Acts to pass in the US (see Edwards, Fear & Gallego, 1995; Crawford, 1998; ). However, in the case of Ghana, the involvement of the average citizen occurred not through the ballot box but through submission of views to review committees. It is unclear whether the Ghanaian approach did not privilege the educated elite since they are the sector most likely to respond in such situations.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing, it is clear that the trend of changes in school language policies in Ghana and the US (as it relates to language minority groups) reveal a common feature: the complexities imposed by the diverse linguistic background of the population.

In my opinion, it is necessary, that national or state efforts be channeled towards re-examining the type of education pre-service teachers needed to be effective in implementing the policy that gets enacted. The NALAP intervention, so far as production of materials in the eleven ‘sponsored’ Ghanaian language, as well as pre-service and in-service teacher education cannot be underestimated. However, the paper holds the view for the intended objective of NALAP to

be fully achieved, it is necessary for the curriculum of the Colleges of Education that prepare teachers for basic schools in Ghana be reviewed so that the study of at least two Ghanaian languages and the methods of teaching in those languages be made compulsory to teacher trainees. Professional development education of basic school teachers in the country could also be aimed at achieving this objective. That way, it can be guaranteed that every basic school teacher will not only be proficient in their chosen languages but also be competent in teaching the various school subjects in them.

Currently, in the curriculum of all tertiary educational institutions in Ghana is a course called Communication Skills (or Communicative Skills). This course is compulsory for all students at the tertiary level and is essentially aimed at improving students' skills in communicating in English. The presence focus or emphasis of the course in English indirectly privileges English over the Ghanaian languages. Since English continues to be Ghana's official or national language, ensuring proficiency in it at the tertiary level is essential. However, this paper is of the view that at least at the College of Education level, a similar course be developed and made compulsory for teacher trainees in their selected Ghanaian languages in addition to what already exists. And this should eventually be implemented at the other tertiary levels of our educational system. Ensuring high skills of communication in the Ghanaian languages among prospective teachers is one way of guaranteeing that the vast majority of Ghanaian children whose first encounter with the learning of English in school, could be instructed well in their first languages on which they can learn English and the other school languages better.

In addition, the policy of teacher posting and transfer should take into consideration the Ghanaian language electives of each graduating basic school teacher. The problem of teachers not being able to speak or teach in the 'sponsored' language of any community will seriously undermine any bilingual policy the nation implements be it NALAP or not.

Finally, governmental support in helping the citizenry embrace the language policy, as well as financial support to the educational sector needs to be forth coming should schools have the needed materials to work with in improving student achievement while implementing the school language policy.

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