

IS THE LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION POLICY AN ISSUE ON THE POLITICAL PLATFORMS IN GHANA? MY POINT OF VIEW

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ABSTRACT: *This paper sets out to explain why the language in education policy is not an issue in Ghana's political platform. It gives a brief history of language in education policy in Ghana and advances some reasons why the language in education policy is not considered an issue on the political platforms in Ghana. Finally, the paper gives several recommendations to help policymakers implement the language in education policy.*

KEYWORDS: education, Language, policy, indigenous, Teachers, instruction

INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the most useful tools every human possess. Without it, one could not express thoughts to others, nor could engage in the activities that commonly take place in society (Di Pietro, 1994). Hence, language is essential to our survival. The prominence of language in nation-building compels countries to adopt or implement policies to promote effective language use for development and social cohesion. The discourse on language policy covers a wide range of issues, including governance, rights, socialization, identity, business, communication and technology. Language Policy relates to what the government put in place officially through legislation, court decisions, executive action, or any other means to determine how languages are used in public spaces. It also determines the language skills needed to meet national priorities and establishes the rights of language users to learn, use, and maintain languages. Governments, through language policy, regulate language use and the necessary steps to maintain clear communication (Crawford, 2000).

Language policy is a programme of action on the role or status of a language in a given community. According to Bamgbose (1991), there are three types of language policy: Official Language Policy which focuses on the languages that are recognised by the government for official purposes, such as for administration, law and media; Educational Language Policy deals with the languages that are recognised by educational authorities as a medium or media of instruction. Finally, General Language Policy involves the unofficial recognition of languages that are used in mass media and businesses by the government. Against this backdrop, this paper analyses and assesses the official language policy in the Ghanaian context.

A brief history of language-in-education policy in Ghana

The controversy surrounding the official language to use as the language across the curriculum in Ghanaian schools, especially, at the lower basic level, dates back to the castle schools and the missionary era. Before formal education, traditional education was conducted in the indigenous languages. The languages used by the White missionaries were Dutch, Portuguese, Danish and English. When the missionaries arrived between 1529 and 1925, they resorted to the development of local languages. This ended up with the adoption of a variety of languages for various purposes, hence varied language policies.

In 1925, when the British colonial government took over the administration of education in the country; Ghanaian languages were used as the medium of instruction at the lower level of education (that is, the first three years of schooling) until 1951. From 1967 to 1969, however, they were used for the first year and between 1970 and 1974, Ghanaian languages were used for the first three years (Ankrah, 2015).

In 2012, the then government led by the New Patriotic Party changed the language policy in education. The introduction of this new language in education policy was sought to make the English language as the accepted language to be used at all levels of education in Ghana. Nevertheless, the Ghanaian languages were made to be studied as compulsory subjects up to the senior secondary (senior high) school (Ansah, 2014). Also, this change, according to the then Minister of Education, Professor Ameyaw-Akumfi, was necessitated as a result of the attitudes and perceptions of some teachers who refused to teach in the classroom throughout primary school education with the English language, especially, teachers in rural areas (Ministry of Education, 2002). English was taught only as a subject but never became the language of instruction, allegedly compromising competence in the English language.

However, a new language policy emerged in 2015. The language-in-education policy was changed again and this decision raised serious debates on various political platforms. The language policy had gone through numerous changes, yet the problems that called for the changes persist. Even though several attempts have been made to minimise the challenges faced by pupils at the lower primary level, issues related to the choice of medium of instruction and pupils' academic achievement remain unresolved. Surprisingly today, the issue of language policy is not part of the political discourse in Ghana.

In many developing countries, the language-in-education policy is constantly an issue for discussion on political platforms. In Ghana, discussions on the language-in-education policy are common among educators, parents, and people in the media. A greater part of these discussions falls into the hands of non-experts who lose sight of the broader linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of language use. The educated elites in the country exhibit a love-hate attitude towards the language policy. While they seem to admire their children's high level of proficiency in English, they still condemn the adoption of the English language as a lingua franca (Adeyanju, 1989:16).

In Ghana presently, the English language is a non-negotiable requirement at every level of education. It is the only medium for proof of academic achievement. However, there is sufficient documented evidence to prove that children perform better in school if they are taught in a language they are familiar with; yet parents and some educational stakeholders opine that pupils acquire these languages at home, so there is no need for them to study them at schools. Research has also established that if children are taught in their mother-tongue, their understanding, then, a transition to a second language, in this case, English, becomes seamlessly successful. According to Pinnock (2009), “the language used to deliver the school curriculum pulls down the educational performance of many of those who do not use it at home, particularly those who do not have regular access to it outside school”. Also, well-paid jobs and promotions are extended to those who demonstrate proficiency in the English language.

It is important to point out that many educational stakeholders do not consider the language policy as a problem because, in Ghana, many people have already taken a stance to accept the English language as the medium of instruction. Even though the Government of Ghana enacted the policy years back, Ghanaians seem to ignore the policy. Globally, international languages such as English is generally valued in high esteem than indigenous languages. According to Coleman (2010), the use of the English language is associated with political and socio-economic status, thus, including indigenous languages in teaching and learning is diabolical. In this vein, some parents and other stakeholders opt for the use of an international language such as English as the medium of instruction in schools rather than the ‘so-called’ indigenous languages. Also, others argue that the use of the indigenous languages would negatively influence learners’ competence in the English language and may lead to a fall in the standard of the Language.

Further, another reason why the present language policy of adopting the indigenous language as a medium of instruction at the formative years is ignored is the stigma attached to indigenous languages. Even though pupils accept that the local languages can help them improve their academic performance, yet they look down on the teachers who teach using such languages. Research has also shown that the use of L1 enhances effective communication between teachers and pupils due to their familiarity with these languages. (Anani,2019). Despite the advantages of the LI use, the English language as a medium of instruction right from primary class one seems preferred in important and influential circles. However, such is not the case in most schools; the policy is not implemented. Teachers in such schools adopt policies that will suit them. To add to this, the Government of Ghana has not taken any bold step(s) to ensure the effective implementation of the policy. The implementation of the language-in-education policy has not been effectively monitored by the Ministry of Education. Besides, none of the officials of the Ghana Education Service (GES) can confidently say anything on the effectiveness of the language policy. The policy itself was implemented without stakeholders’ involvement and the proper allocation of resources. Any language policy for education must be related to the resources available for teaching and learning and publication of materials for instruction. In the case of Ghana, the human and material resources that are needed for the implementation have not been put in place. The policy is, invariably, all the time on paper but in reality, nobody monitors its implementation.

Furthermore, the use of Ghanaian languages as medium of instruction cannot be effectively implemented because there are a lot of contextual challenges that need to be addressed for effective implementation. These contextual challenges include which language to adopt in multicultural communities and the attitudes of different cultural groups towards one another. There are indications that some Ghanaians prefer the use of the language we inherited from our colonizers to the Ghanaian languages.

There are challenges with the implementation of the language policy in its present form. These are summed up as follows:

- i. Teachers have not been trained adequately in the use of Ghanaian languages. Our educational system is such that the teachers for Ghanaian languages must either be native speakers or have considerable competence in the language they are required to teach. Ideally, the posting of teachers should be based on the mother tongue of the teachers. The GES hardly consider this issue, thus postings of teachers are done ineffectively. This undermines the whole implementation of the policy.
- ii. Even in the colleges of education, the Ghanaian language curriculum is written in the English language. There are not adequate textbooks on the content and pedagogy of Ghanaian languages. Also, educational stakeholders advocating the change from the English language to the Ghanaian languages have contributed little or no material resource in the form of publications in Ghanaian languages.
- iii. Many primary school teachers cannot proficiently read and write in their mother tongues. Some teachers have English as their first language and the majority of teachers are not willing to teach Ghanaian languages because they see them as inferior.
- iv. Ghanaian language is not a compulsory subject in senior high schools. However, it is the products from this level who go to the colleges of education to be trained as primary school teachers. In the colleges of education, Ghanaian languages are studied for two years and this is done without proper supervision. So my question is, how can pupils be proficient in the Ghanaian language?
- v. Apart from these shortcomings, the general attitudes of Ghanaians toward L1 education have been unfavourable. Many parents would like to send their children to school to learn to speak and write in the English language. In contemporary communities, one is considered well educated when she/he is proficient in the English language. Education is, then, equated with proficiency in the English language. There are great admiration and respect for those who are proficient in the English language, so Ghanaians will not pave a way for the use of Ghanaian languages.

In my view, the English language is a bad master and a good servant at the same time because of our multilingual context; the English language serves as a common language for easy communication. It also plays a significant role and, as already stated, it is the only language of official communication and to a large extent, the medium of instruction at the upper primary, junior secondary, senior and the tertiary levels. It plays a unifying role in the country by facilitating contact between Ghanaians of diverse linguistic backgrounds. Knowledge needed for the socio-economic and technical advancement of the country is found in books written in English. Even warnings to keep us safe from danger, prescriptions and instructions are all written in the English language. Further, all examinations conducted for entry into educational institutions or tests of one's competence are conducted through the English Language.

In effect, English is the language of education, administration, law, communication, government and commerce. Consequently, it has a distinct role to play in the social life of the Ghanaian. It is the mark of elitism in Ghanaian society. Once one accepts to educate him/herself, there is no good reason not to proficiently speak the English language. A pass in the English Language is a requirement for a student's progression from one educational level to another. Sekyere (2013:1) attests to the fact that success in education depends largely on the English Language. He states that "[s]uccess in any form of education, training and work generally depends on the ability to comprehend and use English language effectively and proficient."

From the discussion so far, it is evident that Ghana is not prepared enough for any change in the language for education. Policies governing language use in Ghana are instituted, however, they will be very difficult to implement because it appears Ghanaians have made up their minds for the English language. Sey (1988:10) has asserted that 'English, however, is considered indispensable, because, by purely historical accident, it has become the most convenient medium of education and the only effective link with the rest of the world...' This situation confines Ghanaian languages usage to domestic, local, traditional, and non-literate entities. It also shows how, as a nation, Ghana has failed to recognize and preserve its national identity. As it stands now, the progress of students in Ghana, especially that of early learners, is being hampered because they are made to learn an unfamiliar language under coercion. They are almost denied the opportunity to learn a language that could promote understanding to grant them a smooth passage throughout their entire education and to build their confidence in their own identities. In sum, I opine that culture is tied to the language of a people, hence, the latter cannot thrive without the former.

In other words, language is the backbone of any society or group of persons. It is through language that people communicate, interact and live together so our indigenous languages cannot be taken for granted. Educational stakeholders should take upon themselves to educate the general public on the importance of the indigenous languages. By so doing, the general public would hold our indigenous languages in high esteem and this would improve students' performances in school.

Recommendation

Teachers should discourage students from attaching any stigma to indigenous languages. Educational stakeholders should also educate parents on the importance of the use of the indigenous languages at the lower level of education.

The Ghana Education Service should set up a team of inspectors to inspect both private and public schools and supervise teachers on the language being used as a medium of instruction.

Researchers should research the L1 and L2 as a medium of instruction in countries which use L1 as a medium of instruction.

Future research can be taken on the evaluation of the use of the indigenous languages and English language to ascertain the best language as a medium of instruction.

To value the use of L1 in our schools, the indigenous languages should be made compulsory in our schools, from primary school to the tertiary level.

Researchers should be encouraged to provide sufficient documented evidence to prove that children perform better in school if they are taught in a language they are familiar with.

Researchers should be encouraged to take a longitudinal study on the best language to adopt as a medium of instruction

The educated elites in the country who exhibit a love-hate attitude towards the language policy should be educated on the language policy. The media houses should also take the role of educating the public on the language in education policy.

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