

The impact of language policy and practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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List of Acronyms

BTL	Bible Translation and Literacy
DfID	UK Department for International Development
EDC	Education and Development Center (US-based education organisation)
EGRA	Early grade reading assessment
ESAR	Eastern and Southern Africa Region
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
L1	First or home language
L2	Second language
MLE	Multilingual education
MLEN	Multilingual Education Network
MoE	Ministry of Education
Mol	Medium of Instruction
MTE	Mother tongue-medium education
NGO	Non-governmental organization
RTI	Research Triangle Institute
SACMEQ	Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
SIL	SIL International, formerly the Summer Institute of Linguistics
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WPM	Words per minute

Glossary

Terms related to languages

- International language: a language spoken in multiple countries; in Eastern and Southern Africa, this is typically a European language. The distribution of these languages across the region is related to their introduction by a colonial power. In the Eastern and Southern Africa region the international languages are primarily English, French and Portuguese.
- Local language: a language spoken in one or more ethnolinguistic communities in a country.
- Mother tongue: the language learned by a child in the home. May also be called first language or home language.
- National language: may refer to a language that has been recognized by law as a language of the nation; or alternatively, to a language that is spoken by one or more ethnolinguistic communities in the nation.
- Official language: a language which has been designated by law as a language of the nation, to be used in governance and education systems.
- Orthography: the alphabet and spelling system of a given language.
- Bilingualism: the ability to speak two languages.
- Biliteracy: the ability to read and write in two languages.
- Code-switching: alternating between two or more languages in a conversation.

Terms related to the education context

- Language of instruction / medium of instruction: the language in which curriculum content is taught.
- Language as subject: the presence of a language in the curriculum as a taught subject.
- Pedagogy: the method and practice of teaching.
- Additive multilingualism / additive multilingual education / additive bilingual education: the use of two languages of instruction concurrently.
- Transitional bilingual or multilingual education: the use of one language as medium of instruction in the early grades, transitioning to the use of a second (or third) language in the later grades.
- Subtractive bilingual education: the replacement of the first language of instruction with a second language of instruction, so that the first language no longer features in the curriculum at all.
- Language immersion education: the intentional and exclusive use of a second language as medium of instruction. Where the home language is not well supported in the print environment or education system, this type of education is called submersion.





Foreword from the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Director

This report – on the impact of language policy and practices on learning – is an important and timely addition to the debate on quality education. Global evidence has been in support of mother tongue-based education as a critical part of high quality education, and the report adds to this body of knowledge.

While the education arguments for the use of mother tongue are robust, decisions on language of instruction in schools are often rooted in a nation's history, culture and environment. In the Eastern and Southern Africa region (ESAR), many parents and policy makers have veered towards early adoption of international languages. In addition, many countries in the region have multiple languages spoken within their borders, which presents logistical and linguistic challenges in using the language the child is best able to speak and understand.

It is against this background and context that UNICEF commissioned this report. The impact of language policy and practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa. The report seeks to gain a deeper understanding on the role language plays in improving the quality of education, and to understand the situation across Eastern and Southern Africa.

The report finds positive links between using the child's home language and learning outcomes. The report highlights that many countries are promoting mother-tongue language policies, though practices in schools frequently diverge from the national language policy and instead use international languages (such as English). This is due to parents' and educators' perceptions on the value of English in terms of accessing jobs and participating in a globalised economy.

However, the report notes that while multilingualism is an important goal, it is not achieved by relegating the mother-tongue language to the home. Instead, the report calls for nurturing the mother tongue through the primary school years. The report suggests advocacy and mobilisation as means to encourage parents to value their home language in the school environment.

The impact of language policy and practice on children's learning argues that improved evidence, networking, south-to-south learning and advocacy are going to be crucial to create a focus on mother-tongue education environments. The report provides a critical evidence base for responding to the changing development context.

By way of conclusion, the report sets a challenge for the region: if learning in the mother-tongue has such formidable implications for learning outcomes, how can the debate amongst parents and policy makers be shifted? And, how do all stakeholders raise the resources so as to invest in mother-tongue language teaching and learning resources?

I sincerely hope that these challenges – as neatly outlined in this report – are those that the regional education community will consider and address.



A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to be 'Leila Gharagozloo-Pakkala'. The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the printed name.

Leila Gharagozloo-Pakkala
Regional Director
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Executive Summary

This literature review of language policy and education quality in the 21 countries of UNICEF's Eastern and Southern Africa Region provides an in-depth, up-to-date perspective on the realities and impact of language use in the region's formal education environments.

The language environment in the Eastern and Southern Region of Africa is rich and dynamic. Many African languages, including Amharic, Kirundi, Swahili, isiZulu, Kinyarwanda, Chichewa, Luganda, Kikuyu, Malagasy, Oromo, and Somali are spoken as mother tongues by millions of African citizens. In addition, there are many hundreds of smaller and less well-recognized African languages. Layered over are a handful of international languages, introduced to the continent as colonial languages.

The international languages have gained a strong foothold in the national institutions of Eastern and Southern Africa. Originally established by colonial governments for the purpose of training local civil servants, the formal education system has consistently been identified with the use of non-African languages of instruction. The more recent influence of globalization has heightened the role and prestige of international languages (particularly English) in education. These languages are now seen as the gateway to global citizenship, economic progress and enhanced social standing.

In this context, issues of language and education are hotly debated, particularly where primary education is concerned. Policy shifts on language of instruction are common, as government authorities try to find a solution that will be both pedagogically effective and acceptable to education stakeholders.

Given the political and pedagogical challenges of language of instruction choices in classrooms, it is crucial to understand the situation clearly; hence this review with a focus on language of instruction and children's learning outcomes.

The research indicates that using the mother tongue in the classroom enhances classroom participation, decreases attrition, and increases the likelihood of family and community engagement in the child's learning. Research also shows that using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction enhances the child's cognitive learning processes, and that learner-centred learning has to be carried out in a language the child speaks in order to be effective.

Evidence on the financial aspects of language of instruction policies demonstrates that widespread concerns about the high costs of local language medium education are not based on evidence. Additional costs for such education are not primarily due to the introduction of local languages into the curriculum, but rather to the immediate costs of good quality education compared to poor quality education. Studies also show that higher implementation costs in local language use are more than offset by lower student attrition and dropout rates.

¹ Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Comoros, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Swaziland, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

The country-by-country review of language and education policy and practice, as well as data on language and student learning outcomes in 21 countries of Eastern and Southern Africa¹, indicate that:

- In more than 90 per cent of the countries studied, the national language policy environment supports the use of local languages of instruction in early primary grades. Classroom practice, however, does not generally conform to these pro-local language policies; classrooms use international languages of instruction far more commonly. This lack of alignment between national policy and classroom practice in effect nullifies the policy's intended effects.
- A number of qualitative and quantitative studies on language of instruction practices in the region indicate that using the language spoken by the child significantly enhances learning outcomes compared to using a language of instruction that the child does not speak.
- Language of instruction, while central to academic success, is just one of a number of components of quality education. Effective language of instruction policy and practice must be accompanied by careful attention to other features of quality education such as teacher capacity and deployment, infrastructure and curriculum.
- Using a local language of instruction requires that the language has acquired a certain level of written development and pedagogical suitability. Where educators are considering several languages of instruction, they need to ensure that the writing system of each language is adequately developed to make it an effective medium for learning.
- Reading assessments across the region point to very low overall reading levels. Using a language of instruction that the learners can understand is a central feature of improving these outcomes. Equally important is a strong component of reading pedagogy.
- A number of externally funded reading interventions are being implemented across the region. Many of these interventions use local languages for instruction in early primary grades (usually grades 1 to 3). These interventions typically feature significant evaluation components, although so far it is difficult to draw strong statistical conclusions about their impact. This is either because the studies are still too new to elicit solid conclusions, or because the language of instruction component is too difficult to distinguish from other innovative components of the interventions.

Comparative education data across the region reinforce these country-level findings. Primary school dropout rates reported in the 2014 Human Development Index (HDI) indicate that the teaching and learning strategies currently being used by ESAR countries are not adequate to keep children in school. Given the correlations that have been found between language of instruction and dropout and repetition rates in primary school, it seems possible that pro-international language policies, compounded by poor implementation of "local language-friendly" policies, bear significant responsibility for the high primary school dropout rate recorded by the HDI. Further research specifically on this matter would add a great deal to our understanding of the links between national policy implementation and international education data.

Data from the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring and Educational Quality (SACMEQ) also indicate the importance of local language instruction to strong learning outcomes. Analysis of SACMEQ III data in 2010 showed strong positive correlations between speaking the language of instruction and pupil achievement, especially in reading. SACMEQ data analysis indicates that 'speaking the language of instruction' is one of seven significant pupil-level predictors for both reading and mathematics.²

² Hungi (2011b: 8) lists the seven indicators: "pupil SES [socio-economic status], pupil sex, pupil age, grade repetition, days absent, homework, and speaking language of instruction".

In the case studies of Ethiopia, South Africa and South Sudan, challenges can be seen in implementing local language policy in multi-language national contexts and in establishing a pedagogically and culturally appropriate role for non-local languages (particularly English) in the education systems.

The evidence in the review supports several recommendations:

1. National and international stakeholders should prioritize advocacy and awareness-raising activities regarding the realities of pedagogy and language. Much research has been done, as evidenced in this language and education review; the findings of this research need to be better disseminated and understood.
2. International education stakeholders in the region should facilitate serious discussion and exchange of experiences regarding language and education across the region. The very real issues of language and national identity need to be thought through, and policy goals need to be shaped around those issues. Regional dialogue could provide encouragement and resources to national decision makers.
3. National and local bodies must give significant attention to the development of written forms of local languages and their suitability for pedagogical use.
4. All institutionally supported initiatives involving learning and development of any kind must aim to use a language of instruction that learners understand. Sustainable development implies effective communication, which in turn implies the use of a language that is well understood by the target audience.
5. National and regional governments, as well as their international funders, should support the implementation of pilot multilingual education programmes that generate evidence valued by parents, communities and policy makers.
6. National and regional governments, and their international funders, must carefully think through the issues of moving from pilot programmes to a national scale initiative. The challenges of scaling up are often quite different from the challenges that have been successfully met in a pilot programme.

Language of instruction, along with other features of quality education such as appropriate curriculum, teacher capacity and effective school leadership, is central to successful learning. Whilst experience shows that effectively integrating appropriate language practices into education and development initiatives is challenging, it is critical if we are to achieve desired learning outcomes. Education stakeholders and institutional partners must think and act collaboratively so that all the crucial features of quality education, including language of instruction, will be successfully addressed.



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