



# Rwanda

The impact of language policy  
and practice on children's learning:  
Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa  
2017

## 2.13 Rwanda

### 2.13.1 Background information

Rwanda gained independence from Belgium in 1962. At that time, Kinyarwanda was designated the language of instruction in Grades 1-3, with French as the language of instruction from Grade 4 onwards. In 1978, a general reform of 'Rwandazation' was launched; at that time, the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) extended primary education to cover the first eight years of schooling, with Kinyarwanda as the medium of instruction for all eight years (Pearson, 2014, p. 1). In 1991, after a nationwide exam revealed poor overall French language ability among students, MINEDUC announced in 1991 a shift back to the previous system.

After the Rwandan genocide of 1994, large numbers of Rwandans began returning from exile in the surrounding Anglophone countries. In response, in 1996 MINEDUC announced a new education reform which designated Kinyarwanda as the medium of instruction from grades 1 to 3, with English joining French as medium of instruction for grades 4 to 6.

Article 5 of the current 2003 Constitution of Rwanda (Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, Art. 5<sup>2</sup>) lists Kinyarwanda as the national language and Kinyarwanda, English and French as the official languages of Rwanda.

Ethnologue lists three languages for Rwanda: Kinyarwanda, French and English.

### 2.13.2. Current language policy

A 2008 strategy document from the Rwandan Ministry of Education signalled another change in language emphasis, moving more decisively from French to English. The document states: "English language shall be a medium of instruction. [It] shall be taught as a second

language while French is taught as an optional language at all levels except in lower primary (P.1, P.2 and P.3) where the medium of instruction shall be Kinyarwanda" (Ministry of Education, 2008, p.11).

### 2.13.3 Education policy and practice

After several years of radical language policy shifts (Samuelson and Freedman, 2010; World Bank, 2011), Rwanda now has two official languages of instruction throughout the educational system: Kinyarwanda in the lower primary years, and English from upper primary through university (Nzabalarwa, 2014, p. 309). French, spoken by a significant number of Rwandans, is one of the official languages and is taught as a subject through university. According to a 2011 World Bank report, "the Primary 6 National Examination tests students in mathematics, science, social studies, English and Kinyarwanda" (World Bank, 2011, p. 99). Teacher education is now in English (IPAR, 2014, p. 4).

### 2.13.4. Studies

Several recent studies were carried out in relation to a Save the Children Literacy Boost project. A baseline assessment of children's reading skills was carried out in the Gicumbi district in northern Rwanda (Friedlander, Gasana and Goldenberg, 2014). An assessment of teachers and classrooms was also carried out; Malik, Gasana, Raab, Cha and Goldenberg (2014) found more textbooks in Kinyarwanda in the classrooms studied than either English or French textbooks.

In 2011, the first Learning Assessment in Rwandan Schools (LARS) was conducted by UNESCO, UNICEF, and Data Angel Policy Research. LARS assessed children's literacy and numeracy skills at Grade 3. The Rwanda Education Board (REB) has since integrated LARS into the REB assessment system, annually assessing children in Grades 2 and 5.<sup>2</sup>

1. [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda\\_2010.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda_2010.pdf). Accessed 11 March, 2016.

2. [http://www.reb.rw/fileadmin/user\\_upload/news/newsletter/Issue\\_004\\_Final.pdf](http://www.reb.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/news/newsletter/Issue_004_Final.pdf). Accessed 11 March, 2016.



### 2.13.5. Language education initiatives

#### Literacy, Language and Learning Initiative (L3)

Begun in 2011, the Literacy, Language and Learning Initiative (L3) is a 5-year initiative to improve Rwandan students' reading and mathematics skills. The project is implemented by a partnership led by the Rwanda Education Board (REB), and is funded by USAID.<sup>3</sup> The Education Development Center (EDC) is providing technical assistance to the project (EDC, 2014). The L3 initiative is assisting the Ministry of Education to implement a national-scale early literacy and mathematics programme, using Kinyarwanda as medium of instruction in the first three years and transitioning to English as a medium of instruction in Grade 4. The project is focused on developing instructional materials and

reading materials in Kinyarwanda and English, and teacher capacity building. It also includes an interactive audio component.

#### Literacy Boost

The Literacy Boost programme is being carried out by Save the Children and World Vision, in two districts of Rwanda (see studies above).

#### School-Based Mentoring Programme

In 2012 the Rwanda Education Board (REB) introduced the School-based Mentor Programme, to support teachers in Rwandan schools with their use of English in the classroom and their teaching methods.<sup>4</sup> The programme currently has approximately 1,000 active mentors, and is supported by the British Council.



<sup>3</sup> [http://www.reb.rw/index.php?id=79andL=4andtx\\_tnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=111andcHash=971ad99470af1e26b17068c5c8804b98](http://www.reb.rw/index.php?id=79andL=4andtx_tnews%5Btt_news%5D=111andcHash=971ad99470af1e26b17068c5c8804b98). Accessed 11 March, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.rw/programmes/education/supporting-teachers-english-through-mentoring-stem>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

### **Save the Children Rwanda**

Save the Children Rwanda is implementing a series of programmes aimed at improving reading and learning among Rwandan children. The Rwandan Children's Book Initiative (RCBI) is being implemented in close collaboration with the REB, to improve literacy by stimulating both the supply and demand for Kinyarwanda children's books and ensuring that books are used effectively in the classroom.<sup>5</sup>

Save the Children hosts the Abana Writers' Café, a monthly event to empower Rwandan authors of children's books (both existing and upcoming) to increase the supply of more and better children's storybooks in Kinyarwanda. The *First Read* and *Literacy Boost* programmes also aim at enhancing Kinyarwanda reading and writing skills among Rwandan children.

### **Complementary Literacy and Health Program**

World Vision is partnering with the World Food Programme on a 5-year project to provide Kinyarwanda literacy and health interventions to children in 6 districts of Southern Province and Western Province. The project is targeting 83,000 children in 104 schools.

### **Rwanda English in Action Programme**

Between 2009 and 2011, the Ministry of Education and the British Council implemented the Rwanda English in Action Programme (REAP). The initiative, funded by DfID, focused on improving the quality of English teaching in the formal education system through a variety of strategies.<sup>6</sup> The international NGO Wellspring and the British VSO provided support for REAP as well.



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5 [http://www.reb.rw/fileadmin/user\\_upload/news/newsletter/Issue\\_004\\_Final.pdf](http://www.reb.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/news/newsletter/Issue_004_Final.pdf). Accessed 11 March, 2016

6 <http://www.britishcouncil.org/partner/track-record/rwanda-english-action-programme>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.