



# Uganda

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

## 2.19 Uganda

### 2.19.1 Background information

After nearly 85 years under British rule, Uganda gained independence in 1962. At that time kiSwahili and English were designated the official languages; this choice was heavily influenced by the politics of the time, since kiSwahili is spoken by only a very small percentage of the population.

In 1989, the Education Review Commission of the Ministry of Education recommended that the mother tongue be the language of instruction for the first four years of primary school, with English taught as a subject (Kyeyune, 2003, p. 174). The curriculum reform that enacted this recommendation was established in 2007 (Altinyelken, 2010, p. 151).

Ethnologue lists 41 languages for Uganda.

### 2.19.2. Current language policy

The education system in Uganda is gradually undergoing implementation of the 2007 curriculum reform, mandating the use of local languages in Grades 1 to 3. English is the language of instruction from Grade 4 onwards (Uganda National Examinations Board, 2012, p. 2) Wolff (2011) describes the justification for this policy: “The rationale behind the new policy was primarily to use local languages in order to develop a sense of belonging to and pride in indigenous cultures, but also to improve literacy results and academic learning results in general, which had been rather poor under the English-only language policy of the past” (p. 99).

### 2.19.3. Education policy and practice

Piper and Miksic (2011) describe three features of the 2007 curriculum. First, it focused heavily on a few subject areas, determining that early primary children should learn a few subjects in an integrated fashion. Reading and literacy

became much more central under this new curriculum, with two classes per day for most children, and up to 90 minutes of literacy instruction per day. Second, the thematic curriculum was aligned with the mother tongue policy, with strict instructions for teachers to use the mother tongue across subjects for Grades 1 to 3. Third, materials were developed to support the thematic curriculum approach. The authors also note, however, that “these materials were only slowly distributed to the school level and were not developed in all of the mother tongues that teachers were using” (p. 6).

A report by the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) in 2012 (2012) noted that Grade 3 pupils’ performance in numeracy was higher than that in English language literacy; the report speculates that the numeracy being taught in the mother tongue “possibly enables pupils to understand the concepts better.” It recommends that classroom teachers teach English using appropriate methods of teaching it as a second language (p. 76).

The curricular focus on local language medium of instruction is not universally supported, however. Where poor performance is seen in rural schools, at least some communities and parents are relating that poor performance to the use of local language in the classroom rather than English. Where teaching and learning materials in the local languages are not available, this also hinders local teacher support for the curriculum.

### 2.19.4. Studies

Kaahwa (2011) published an analysis of the role of culture, including language, in teaching and learning mathematics in rural Ugandan schools. The author argues that “the use of a second language as a medium of instruction introduces learning difficulties in mathematics. This is especially the case in rural areas of Uganda, where English<sup>1</sup>, a second language to all learners, is the medium of instruction at all levels” (p. 54).

Tembe and Norton (2008) report on a study of multilingual language and literacy conducted in eastern Uganda from 2005 to 2006. The study

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1. UNICEF, Uganda 2017

examined the extent to which the new local language policy was supported by both rural and urban community stakeholders.

The study, according to Tembe and Norton, found that “in both communities, although participants were generally aware of the new local language policy, they were ambivalent about its implementation in their school. They recognized the importance of local languages in promoting identity and cultural maintenance, but a higher priority was their children’s upward mobility and the desire to be part of wider and more international communities” (p.33). The study also found that English was far more strongly supported as a second language than either Luganda (a mother tongue language) or kiSwahili.

Research by Sprenger-Tasch (2003, p. 357) indicated that 80% of the Ugandans interviewed preferred that the mother tongue be used, either alone or along with other languages, as medium of instruction in lower primary grades; English was the second most preferred language. For upper primary, however, the preference of those interviewed was strongly for English (96%), followed by mother tongue (28%).

## 2.19.5. Language education initiatives

### **School Health and Reading Program (SHRP)**

The USAID-funded Uganda School Health and Reading Program (SHRP)<sup>2</sup> is a 5-year initiative implemented by RTI, SIL/SIL LEAD and World Education, in cooperation with the Ugandan Ministry of Education. Commencing in 2012, the programme is carrying out orthography review, developing reading pedagogical materials in 12 Ugandan languages, as well as English, and engaging in extensive teacher training and supervision support.

### **Support for early grade reading**

The MoES focus on improving early grade reading in Ugandan languages and in English has been supported by a GPE/World Bank programme aimed at enhancing teacher effectiveness in teaching reading as well as other competencies. This programme is running from 2014-2018.<sup>3</sup>



2. <http://www.usaid.gov/uganda/press-releases/trained-teachers-and-over-400000-pupil-books-increase>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

3. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/915031468185036165/pdf/PAD614-PAD-Uganda-GPE-P133780-Final-PAD-PUBLIC.pdf>

### **Northern Uganda Literacy Program.**

Mango Tree,<sup>4</sup> a Ugandan education resources company established in 2004, began the Lang'ŋ Literacy Project in 2009. This is a pilot multilingual education project in the Lang'ŋ language community of northern Uganda. The project has included orthography development with the Lang'ŋ language community, extensive materials development, writer training and classroom implementation. The project has since been renamed the Northern Uganda Literacy Program, and operates in the Kumam language community as well.

### **Uganda Multilingual Education Network (MLEN)**

This activist network, based in Kampala, began in 2009 when a group of NGO leaders and educationalists met to discuss challenges related to the use of the home language in formal education. Network members include representatives from Save the Children, Mango Tree Educational Enterprises, UNESCO, UNICEF, the Uganda National Curriculum Development Centre, Kyambogo University, Makerere University's Institute of Languages, Uwezo Uganda, Straight Talk Uganda, The Forum for Education NGOs in Uganda, and the Dutch development organization, SNV (Trudell 2014, p. 8).

### **MobiLiteracy Uganda**

This project is a two-year initiative sponsored through the All Children Reading Grand Challenge.<sup>5</sup> The project uses mobile phones to deliver daily SMS messages with age-appropriate literacy activities and related parent education to rural Ugandan parents and their Grade 1 children. The implementing partners are Urban Planet Media and Entertainment, RTI, and the Kasissi Project, which supports struggling rural schools in and around Kibale National Park, Uganda.

### **Literacy Boost**

Save the Children began a Literacy Boost programme in 2011, in two districts of northern Uganda,<sup>6</sup> using the language of the area, Acholi. A midline evaluation carried out in 2012 noted that students who performed well in the more advanced literacy skills tended to be those who were borrowing books from the Literacy Boost Book Bank, and whose family members were involved in the child's learning to read.

### **Breakthrough to Literacy (BTL)**

Letshabo (2002) reports on a pilot Breakthrough to Literacy project for teaching literacy in local languages, carried out from 2001 by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) in partnership with UNICEF, the Institute of Teacher Education Kyambogo (now Kyambogo University), and the National Curriculum Development Centre. The Molteno Institute was responsible for developing materials, implementing the programme and training teachers, while the materials were published by Maskew Miller Longman Publishers of South Africa.

### **Basic Education in Urban Poverty Areas (BEUPA)**

In the late 1990s, the Ministry of Education and Sports and the German aid agency (GIZ) funded the Basic Education in Urban Poverty Areas (BEUPA) project<sup>7</sup> (Ouane and Glanz 2010). The project targeted adolescents with a basic education curriculum in the local language and vocational skills training.

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4 <http://www.mangotreeuganda.org/>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

5 <http://www.rti.org/page.cfm?obj=39BFD6D0-5056-B100-0CC4429A093082DE>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

6 <http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/sites/default/files/documents/6861.pdf>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

7 <http://www.youth-employment-inventory.org/inventory/view/344/>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.