



National Language and Literacy Policies and Multilingualism in Ghana: Implication for Literacy Development in Basic Schools

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Abstract: This paper discusses the Ghanaian language policies and multilingualism and their implication for literacy development in Basic Schools in the country. A configurative synthesis approach to Systematic Reviews of secondary qualitative data was used to analyse the influence that Ghana's current national language and literacy policy has on bilingual or multilingual education and how that translates into literacy instruction in basic schools. It was discovered that, Ghana had several languages and literacy policies over the years with the most recent of them being the National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP) introduced in 2009. This policy advocated for 80% use of local Ghanaian language (L1) for instructional purposes from Kindergarten 1&2 to primary two (P.2) and 50% in primary three (P.3) in addition to the English language (L2). The policy aims at producing bilingual Ghanaian children by the end of P.3. This implies that teachers are supposed to teach children how to read, write and speak in both Ghanaian and English languages and concepts in the various subjects must be taught in Ghanaian language as the main medium of instruction supported by the English language. From primary four (P.4) upwards, the English language becomes the main medium of instruction up to secondary school. This language and literacy policy focuses on only eleven (11) Ghanaian languages out of a total of eight-three (83). The current study then recommends among others that, more Ghanaian languages should be developed into writing forms and adapted for use in education to increase the probability of children being instructed in an L1 that is their mother tongue. Also, for the policy to achieve its aim, learners should be allowed to choose a Ghanaian language as a core subject right from KG to study it up to the tertiary level.

Keywords: Language policy, Ghanaian language, Literacy instruction, L1 & L2.

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

African is a multilingual and multicultural continent where people speak multiple languages. In most African societies, children experience complex linguistic interactions because there are two or more languages spoken by people around them (Lüpke, 2010). Through Islam and trade, Arabic, Jula, and Hausa languages became part of the continent's linguistic make-up. French, English, and Portuguese which are used as official languages in countries across the African continent were introduced through colonialism (Vigouroux & Mufwene, 2009 cited in Lüpke, 2010). Africans have turned to use these foreign languages for official purposes and instruction in schools at the expense of their own indigenous languages. This is because there are over two thousand languages spoken in African and decision-makers are afraid to choose one language over the others as this may jeopardise national peace and unity. To add to this, the quest to open up their countries to international cooperation in the face of globalisation and technological advancement complicates issues for decision-makers in Africa as far the choice of language in education is concerned (Association for the Development of Education Africa, 2005). National language and literacy policies in most African countries recommend the use of indigenous languages for teaching in lower grades. However, the reality in most schools is that, foreign languages are used more often for instructional purposes. This situation makes most language and literacy policies ineffective in Africa. Meanwhile, many studies have demonstrated that, the use of local languages in education promotes parental involvement in children's schooling and literacy development. Teaching children in their mother tongue promotes active learner participation in classroom activities and lifelong learning (United Nations Children's Fund, 2016). Multilingual practices in education promote cultural diversity, the acceptance, and

valorisation of indigenous languages and culture as well as enhance children's literacy skills (Okal, 2014).

Literacy can be defined as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. It involves a continuum of learning that enable individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society”. It is a fundamental human right for all persons regardless of their mental, social and economic statuses to be literate. Literacy makes it possible for people to express their thoughts and ideas, link up with others, and take up opportunities in society (UNESCO, 2014 cited in Montoya, 2018, p.2).

There are about eighty-three (83) local languages spoken in Ghana. The country language and literacy policies over the years focused only on five (5) of those languages spoken by majority ethnic who represent 90.7% of Ghana's population namely Akan (49.1%), Mole-Dagbani (16.5%), Ewe (12.7%), Ga-Adangbe (8%) and Guan (4.4%). Through adequate language and literacy policies, these numerous indigenous languages could be used in education to promote academic success, multilingualism, cultural infusion, peace, and national unity, and international collaboration (Ansah, 2014). However, in a multilingual and multicultural society like Ghana, language and literacy development policies are faced with a dilemma: which language should be used as a medium of instruction in schools, English or indigenous languages? The existing national language and literacy policies seem inadequate to address this question in order to meet the learning needs of Ghana's diverse linguistic learner population. These policies lack some sort of all-inclusive direction and synchronised approaches in the use of the English language and local languages in education, media, and institutions (Mpofu & Mutasa, 2014). In sum, available literature indicates that the use of indigenous languages in education has a positive influence on children's language and literacy development and academic performance. Ghana like many African countries is a multilingual and multicultural society. This linguistic and cultural diversity comes with a lot of opportunities but as far as education is concerned, it is a challenge especially with the invasion of foreign languages through colonisation and trade. This is because globalisation has imposed foreign languages like English as a universal language that one must master to be able to function well in this world. Scholars and policy-makers in Ghana and other African countries are divided over the choice of the language to be used for instruction in schools: Indigenous language or English language? This dilemma has resulted in many national language and literacy policies in Ghana with diverse approaches to language and literacy instruction and aiming at addressing the country's literacy deficit and reflecting Ghana's diverse linguistic and cultural background.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Using the child's mother languages as a medium of instruction in school increases children's confidence level and interest in learning and makes their learning of secondary languages more effective. That is, “fluency and literacy in the mother tongue lay a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning additional languages” (Ball, 2010, p.4). In addition to its influence on literacy instructional practices, the definition of literacy must inform national and international language and literacy development policies and research (Keefe & Copeland, 2011). It is against this background that, this study seeks to examine Ghana's current national language policy and multilingualism and its implication for literacy development in basic schools.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

- (1) To examine Ghana's current language and literacy policy and multilingualism
- (2) To examine the implication of the NALAP for literacy instruction in basic schools

1.3. Methods

Configurative synthesis approach to Systematic Reviews of secondary data was used to analyse qualitative data on Ghana's current national language policy and multilingualism and its implication for literacy development in basic schools. Eleven (11) published studies related to (1) Language policy and multilingualism in Ghana and (2) Literacy Instruction and bilingualism in Ghana were located on Sage, Routledge, ERIC, IISTE, and Elsevier databases through google.com search engine.

Secondary data from those selected publications that were deemed relevant to the current study were synthesised and presented for in-depth analysis and discussion.

2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. Ghana's Current Language and Literacy Policy and Multilingualism

Since the introduction of formal education in Ghana and especially from 1957, all successive governments supported the study of our local languages in schools at the lowest level. However, the different policies and educational reforms over the years reveal the divergent views of past and present governments on whether the local language (L1) or English language (L2) should be the medium of instruction at the lower primary and whether both should be used and if so, at what level one overtakes the other. For instance, 2001, 2002 and 2004 language policies directed Heads of Basic Schools in Ghana to use (1) the local language only (2) the English language only, and (3) both local language and English for teaching from Primary one (P1) to Primary three (P3) respectively (Anyidoho, 2018).

In 2006 the Ghana Education Service (GES) set up the National Literacy Task Force (NLTF) to assess the literacy level in Ghanaian schools. The Task Force found out that, most basic school pupils had poor literacy skills levels. To improve upon the situation and to ensure quality education in Ghana, the NLTF recommended the adoption of the National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP). The programme targeted kindergarten one (KG1) to Primary three (P3) teachers and pupils. It was an instructional approach designed to make pupils literate in their local language for a smooth transition to English and in so doing produce bilingual learners by P3. Thus, teachers and pupils were provided with quality literacy materials, effective instruction, and public support to read and write in their local language and English (Ghana Education Service, 2010 cited in Anyidoho, 2018). In line with the 2004 literacy policy, NALAP adopted the use of both the local and English languages in teaching. However, the local language received eighty percent (80%) of instructional time in KG and P1 which gradually reduces to 50% by the time learner were entering P3 (Anyidoho, 2018).

It appears clearly that NALAP and previous language & literacy policies in Ghana aimed at helping school children to achieve reading fluency in their local language (L1) and in English (L2) and to become functionally literate and bilingual by the time they exit P3. The ultimate objective was to equip most children with the literacy skills needed for further academic pursuit upon completion of their basic education and in so doing improve their learning ability. Many studies support that, teaching child in a language that they are familiar with promotes effective teaching and learning and improves learners' academic performance as compared to the use of foreign languages. Meanwhile, the use of indigenous languages in education, requires that, they should be in "a certain level of written development and pedagogical suitability" (United Nations Children's Fund, 2016, p.10). However, it was found that only 11 out of the 83 indigenous languages spoken in Ghana are written. This implies that, some of our local languages cannot be used for instruction with the current language and literacy policies. These are local languages that do not have a writing system and so can only serve as supporting languages in teaching as teachers may use them to explain certain concepts taught in English to enhance children's understanding. Also, certain concepts in English, Mathematics, Sciences and other subjects cannot be taught exclusively in Ghanaian languages because of the lack of terminologies to name and describe some of those concepts in our local languages. Therefore, the aim of the policy (NALAP) to use Ghanaian language as the main language of instruction in lower grades will not be effective.

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that, when children acquire reading and writing fluency in the L1 right from the basic level throughout higher grades, it helps them to easily learn the L2. Also, with more practice and skills training in the L1, they can become fully bilingual or multilingual individuals (Ball, 2010). This suggests that, the language and literacy policy must be reviewed to include higher grade levels. This will widen the scope of the policy and prolong its implementation period while providing more time for practice. Again, the policy as it stand now, only provides the opportunity for the students to acquire basic literacy skills in selected Ghanaian languages. In its current form, the policy may not be able to produce bilingual learners who can fluently read, write and speak Ghanaian

languages in addition to the English language. This is because the policy does not provide enough time for practice. Meanwhile, the success of the policy depends immensely on the duration of the intervention and instructional approaches used in the process.

2.2. The Implication of the NALAP for Literacy Instruction in Basic Schools

The National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP) suggests that, local languages should be the main medium of instruction from kindergarten one (KG1) up to primary three (P3) alongside the English language. This is to help children develop early literacy and numeracy skills in both the L1 and L2 to set the foundation for further skills development in higher grades. From Primary up to secondary school, the English language becomes the main medium of instruction while indigenous languages are taught as a subject in school (Bisilki, 2018). This means that, literacy instruction in Ghana begins in KG1 and focuses on teaching children how to read, write and speak local Ghanaian languages (L1) and the English language (L2). Ball (2010) argues that to achieve bilingual education it is important to introduce children to the chosen international language (L2) at the early grades as a subject and an instructional tool in addition to the indigenous languages. This is exactly what the NALAP sought to achieve. As such, the NALAP promoted indigenous Ghana languages through mass production of books and teacher handbooks written in eleven (11) local languages and other teaching materials. The NALAP approach is supported by many studies including the one conducted by The United Nations Children's Fund in 2016 which recommended that adequate writing systems must be developed for our indigenous languages to be effectively used for instructional purposes and to promote literacy development and multilingualism. Notwithstanding, the NALAP focusing on only eleven (11) Ghanaian indigenous languages out of a total of eighty-three (83) could have been a challenge in some communities. This explains why in some schools children are taught in a local language (L1) different from their mother tongue. In other schools, children are taught only in the English language (L2). This may present some opportunities to develop multilingual literacy skills for non-native speakers of a local language (L1) used as a language of instruction. It may also present some challenges to children who are not conversant at all with the L1 used for instruction in their community. Many studies have found that, the use of mother tongue in education promotes active learning, cultural identity and sets the foundation for literacy development and bilingual or multilingual education. This means that ideally, the L1 should be the child's mother tongue. However, it is not always the case because the current language and literacy policy operates only with eleven (11) Ghanaian languages. With this policy the selection of a Ghanaian language as a medium of instruction is based on which local language is widely spoken in a particular region; for instance, Twi is used in the Ashanti region, Dagbani in the Northern region, Gonja is the Savannah Region, Ga is the Greater Accra and Fanti is the Central Region. This does not suggest that, these are the only ethnic groups in those regions. Other ethnic groups also exist in those regions and may feel marginalised. Nonetheless, until the government introduces a new and more inclusive language and literacy policy, other Ghanaian languages will continue to be overpowered by the eleven languages endorsed by the current national language and literacy policy (NALAP). The dilemma of policy-makers will also persist in this current context of national unity and cultural inclusion being advocated by many. What will be the best approach? Obviously, the introduction of Ghanaian languages in education is a good thing. However, most private schools in Ghana use only the English language for instructional purposes. It is even an act of indiscipline to speak Ghanaian language or vernacular (as it is commonly called) in most private schools in Ghana. Paradoxically, learners (even KG children) in private schools speak, write and read English language more and more fluently than their colleagues in public schools where local languages are used (solely or in addition to the English language) for instructional purposes. Year in, year out BECE chief-examiner's reports reveal that, most public basic schools in Ghana continue to record low literacy skills level and overall poor academic performances in English, Mathematics and the sciences compared to most private schools. This is a clear sign that, the current national language and literacy policy is not working. What should be the focus of Ghana's future language and literacy policies? Is it not high time for public basic schools in Ghana to focus on the teaching and learning of the English language as the sole language of instruction in school? Even with that, local Ghanaian languages can still be studied as elective subjects from KG up to the university.

3. CONCLUSION

In The face of globalisation international languages such as English and French have gained a lot of acceptance in education. The learning of these languages is believed to open up countries to socio-economic development and global inclusion. It is against this background that, the governments and scholars all over Africa are heated in a debate over which language should be used for instruction in schools and what will be the role of African indigenous languages in our educational systems? The answers to these questions have resulted in many languages and literacy policies in Ghana from 2001 up to date with varied directives. Some suggested the use of Ghanaian languages (L1) only while others recommended the use of the English language (L2) only as the major medium of instruction from Primary one (P.1) up to Primary three (P.3).

In its quest to invest in bilingual education, the government of Ghana through the National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP) advocated for the use of both L1 and L2 from kindergarten one (KG1) to Primary three (P.3). This, according to the policy, will set the foundation for more complex literacy skills development in advanced grade levels. This policy (NALAP) has however shown its limits in addressing the aspirations of the Ghanaian people in the face of globalisation and the current paradigm shift in literacy instruction in the 21st century. There is a need for the government to develop a new language and literacy policy to meet the literacy demands of our times.

4. RECOMMENDATION

The government should invest in developing writing systems for more indigenous Ghanaian languages and make them suitable for instruction. This will make it possible for most Ghanaian children to be instructed in their mother tongue.

Also, the National Teaching Council should introduce Ghanaian language as a core course throughout teacher education. Student-teachers should be allowed to choose which Ghanaian language they want to study as part of their teacher training. This will prepare them adequately to help learners develop reading and writing literacy skills in the L1 and L2.

In addition, since all Ghanaian local languages cannot be used for instruction in school, it will be appropriate to institute a cultural week in all public schools to give the opportunities to various ethnic groups to showcase their cultural and linguistic heritage. This will foster cultural acceptance and infusion as well as strength national peace and unity.

Again, with the NALAP, local languages are used for instruction from KG 1 to P3. This is not enough to produce bilingual or multilingual individuals who can fluently speak, read and write in local languages and English language. Therefore, allowing learners to study a Ghanaian language of their choice as a core subject from early grade up to the tertiary level will make them bilingual or multilingual individuals who can fluently speak, read and write in local languages and English language. This will also promote Ghanaian languages more effectively.

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Citation: Abdallah Soma. “National Language and Literacy Policies and Multilingualism in Ghana: Implication for Literacy Development in Basic Schools” *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, vol 10, no. 1, 2022, pp. 36-41. doi: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1001004>.

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