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Examining the Importance of Using Ghanaian Languages as a Medium of Instruction at the Early Years of the Child's Schooling

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Abstract

Various researches and literatures have revealed that, the use of Ghanaian languages in early grades education has led to an established and improved knowledge acquisition. This article, however, examined the importance of using Ghanaian languages as a medium of instruction at the early year of a child development. It's believed that learning other languages with a basic knowledge is quite vital as it promotes a comparative understanding of the cross-linguistic approaches. The data for this study was collected through questionnaire, interviews and general observation which targeted both parents and students of colleges. Desktop study was also employed on the existing literatures regarding Ghanaian languages. The results revealed that attitudes of both parents and students towards learning of Ghanaian language in schools has made students not to have a firm foundation in the language which in turn affect the students at the college level. The study concluded that foreign languages lack authenticity thus, the policy makers should consider the importance of the child's mother tongue or language which is familiar to the child and use it as a medium of instruction in early years and even above, the child will grow to become a responsible citizen.

Keywords: Early grade education, Ghanaian languages, school, students



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1.0 Introduction

Various researches on language in education have established that the use of the Ghanaian language as medium of instruction during one's early years of schooling results in improved acquisition of knowledge by pupils (Andoh-Kumi, 1992; Fafunwa, Macauley, Sokaya 1989; Hakuta 1990; Collison 1972, 1975). It has also been established that the use of mother tongue as language of instruction is effective in helping with the acquisition of second language. Education through the medium of mother tongue also ensures that a 'child's educational development is rooted in his own cultural heritage (Criper & Widdowson as cited in Trappers- Lomax 1990). Rubagumya (1990) and Robinson (1996a) also pointed that evidence from international research show that the use of the first language is a factor in educational achievement and that the educational process in any society ought to be conducted through a language that both learner and the teacher command well.

Barrett (1994) maintains that this can be done by starting where the pupils begin with their experience and existing knowledge and thus position them as "knowers" and by allowing them to use their own language within the classrooms. This indicates the need for the cultural contextualization of education. Otherwise, if the shift from one language of instruction to the other continues as it often does, education turns out to be a constricting and restricting factor. This argument was made by Yahya-Othman (1990). Instruction in the Ghanaian language contributes far more to the cultural, affective, cognitive and socio-psychological development of the child than instruction in the official/foreign language (Akinnaso, 1993; Alidou, 1997; Bergmann, Klans & Ritter 2002; UNESCO, 2003).

Brock-Utne (2005) and Alidou (1997) have analysed the importance of using the mother tongue or a familiar language in education of the student as follows:

1. It helps the child to progress from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from known to the unknown, hence, respecting a basic sound pedagogical principle.
2. By the use of the mother tongue language in teaching, teachers and students communicate better. Such communication leads to better teaching on the part of the teacher and better learning for students. Teachers are more likely to use effective and student-centered teaching methods that enhance their effort to teach and student's effort to learn.
3. Using the children's mother tongue or a familiar language as a medium of instruction facilitates the integration of African culture into the school curriculum and developing a positive perception of the culture. In addition to

- that, integrating the children's culture and language into curricular activities ensures the involvement of parents into school activities, therefore making schools part of the community.
4. Use of mother tongue as a medium of an instruction leads to more effective teaching of sciences and mathematics (Prophet & Dow 1994; Mwinsheikhe, 2002, 2003) as supported by the case of Ethiopia. Also, comparative studies between monolingual schools teaching the official /foreign language and bilingual primary schools show that pupils in bilingual schools perform better in primary school leaving examinations than those in monolingual schools.

For every country to develop, it depends on the language of communication and not only a matter of material "inputs" (Childers as cited in Robinson 1996a). Robinson pointed out that development projects require communication in order to be taken by local people, and when they are sustained by the local people themselves they involve communication both within the local community and with outside sources. He continued by saying that, since human communication is largely through the use of language(s), linguist issues become inseparable from issues related to development.

Governor Guggisberg realizing the importance of the Ghanaian languages as important ingredients of national identity stated in his sixteen principles on education that "whilst an English education must be given it must be based solidly on the vernacular"(McWilliam,1975, p.58).

Research conducted in some African countries indicated that the use of the mother tongues in the basic education produces positive outcomes if carefully implemented. The primary beneficial aspects are: the improvement of communication and interactions in the classroom and the integration of African cultures and indigenous knowledge systems into formal school curricula. Effective communication leads to more successful learning opportunities in classrooms where languages familiar to both children and teachers are used as medium on instruction at least in the first three years of education (Alidou, 1997; Alidou & Mallam, 2003; Heugh, 2000; Bamgbose, 2005; Brock-Utne, 2000; Ouedraogo, 2003).

Saville-Troike (1988) also pointed out that teaching pupils in their language one (L1) serves as background knowledge, pre-existing knowledge upon which inferences and predictions can be made to facilitate transfer. Krashen (1996) noted that when schools provide children with quality education in their primary language, they give them knowledge and literacy, and the knowledge they have gained in the primary language

helps them make the English they hear and read more comprehensible.

Brock-Utne (2005) has outlined the importance of teaching students through the use of their mother tongue as follows:

- 1) Training them in skills like combining earlier knowledge with new knowledge.
- 2) Developing creative qualifications like independence and critical thinking.
- 3) Training of ability to enter into construction co-operation with others.
- 4) It helps them build self-confidence and a belief in themselves and their learning potential.

An evaluation study of the improving Educational Quality Project in Ghanaian primary schools also found out that pupils participated more actively when Ghanaian language was used as the language of instruction (Dzinyela, 2001).

Chekaraou (2004) in his comprehensive study in two of the bilingual pilot schools in Niger using Hausa as the language of instruction in the early grades tells that teaching with a language which students are familiar with forested active teacher–student interaction which enabled students to “develop their critical thinking skills which were transferable to all learning experiences even when first language ceased to be the language of instruction in upper grades”. He goes on to explain how teaching through a familiar language helps the cognitive development of students. By and large, native language use contributed to children developing knowledge that they would not have obtained otherwise. For example, the discussion of idioms related to the body parts which carried metaphorical meanings and the proverbs that the teacher discussed with his students were edifying examples which helped children to develop meta-linguistic skills in their own language which contributed to enhancing their overall cognitive potentials.

In an overview of research on language of instruction in Africa, Alidou and Mallam (2003) conclude that when taught in African languages, students are much more active than when taught in the national, yet foreign languages. The teaching through mother tongue is more effective and provides for quality learning for students where they can combine existing knowledge with new knowledge.

The effective use of familiar languages in African classrooms facilitates the development of literacy. It also helps pupils learn more effectively in other subjects such as mathematics (Kaphesi, 2003).

According to Prophet and Dow (1994) a set of science concepts was taught to an experimental group in Setswana and to control group in English. When these two groups were tested on the understanding of these concepts, it was found out that those students who were taught science concepts in Setswana in Botswana had developed a significantly

better concept than those taught in English. Also, Secondary school students in Tanzania who were taught science concepts in Kiswahili did far better than those taught in English (Mwinsheikhe; 2002, 2003).

Fredua-Kwateng and Ahia (2004) mentioned that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded a study to investigate the differences in Academic performance of private and public elementary schools in Ghana. The private schools use English as the medium of instruction from grade 1 while the government schools at the time of the study were using local languages for the first three grades. The study reports that at primary three, private school students had a mean score of 48% in English compared with those in public schools that had 34%. With regards to mathematics achievement at the same level, however, the mean score for public schools was 58% and 41% for private schools. The difference in favour of the public schools is likely to come from the fact that children there have been taught in the mother tongue during the first years of schooling and were taking their exams in the local language.

According to Traore (2001) the use of African languages along with an active pedagogy supports and enhances students' ability to learn. Through the use of languages familiar to both teachers and children, teachers are able to appeal easily to pupil's prior knowledge and to guide them toward self-learning, cooperative learning, hands-on activities and especially the acquisition of new knowledge (Alidou & Jung, 2002).

Sampa (2003) also stated that when teachers teach effectively reading, writing and literacy in the mother tongues students can develop adequate literacy skills that they can use in learning the official languages. Hakuta (1990) points out that, native language proficiency is a strong indicator of second language development. The use of the child's first language in education has been shown to enhance the academic, linguist and cognitive achievement of learners (Baker, 2001). Krashen and Terrell (1983) for example, identified the constant use of the target language by the instructor in the teaching and learning process as a factor in enhancing their proficiency in the language.

Issahaku (2002) also saw the need for Ghanaian Languages to be used as a medium of instruction. According to him, the mother tongue psychologically is the system of meaningful signs that in the mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, he said it is a means of identification among members of the community to which the child belongs. According to him, it is argued that since mother tongue acquisition begins very early in life its importance in the development of the child's intellectual and other aspects of personality in early education must be profound. The slightest disturbance to this vital role by a second language may produce lasting and

unhappy effect and hamper the child's intellectual development. He continued by saying that since the school and the home are different environments, the child on entering school for the first time should not be made to feel intimidated in any way. In the home environment the child is so free, he is able to communicate freely with members of the family, he expresses himself, he is understood and he is involved in most family activities and also with friends. If the mother tongue is used in the school as a medium of instruction the child will not feel intimidated, he will be integrated into the school system very easily. The child will feel at home for the teacher, and those in class will understand him. He will be able to participate in class activities because he understands the language. He said this will help the child to build confidence in himself and socializes very quickly because of the language. According to him, since human beings learn from the known to the unknown, he will be able to grasp new concepts very fast without many problems.

2.0 Research Designs and Methods

This is entirely an evidenced-based research, therefore, interviews, questionnaire and observatory methods were used in data collection. A descriptive approach was employed because it seeks to describe the problem and its effects. According to Best and Khan (as cited in Amedahe, 2010), descriptive research is concerned with the conditions or relationships that exist; such as determining the nature of prevailing conditions, practices and attitudes; opinions that are held; processes that are going on; or trends that are developed. Although this method is time consuming and demands the involvement of the researcher, the data collected by this design offers detailed information of the study.

3.0 Findings

It has been realized that using the child's mother tongue in teaching and also allowing the child to study it has a great benefit to him/her. Some of these benefits are acquisition of communication skills in the language, maintenance of good relationships with family members, avenue for occupation such as translator, interpreter and trade and commerce. It has also been revealed that the students inability to cope with the teaching and learning of Ghanaian language at the college level were due to where they had their basic education and the language of instruction in those schools. Also selection of course at the senior high school level has affected the students' learning of the Ghanaian language. Again both the students and their parent's attitude towards the teaching and learning of Ghanaian language in school also affected their inability to cope well with the course at college level. Finally it was clear that the language policy at senior high level was the major cause of the problem students are facing in learning of Ghanaian language in colleges of

education.

4.0 Results and discussion

The results revealed that attitude of both parents and students towards learning of Ghanaian language in schools has made students not to have a firm foundation in the language which in turn affect the students at the college level. Parents and students should change their mind that education can only be given in English because a child whose initial education is given in the first language will benefit a lot. Saville-Troike asserted this when he said teaching pupils in their first language serve as background knowledge, a pre-existing knowledge upon which inferences and predictions could be made to facilitate transfer. According to Brock-Utne (2005) teaching students through the use of their mother tongue will help them to combine earlier knowledge with new knowledge, develop independence and critical thinking, co-operate with others, build self-confidence, and a belief in themselves and their learning potential.

The result also revealed that most students did not study the Ghanaian language at the junior high school level and because of that, studying it at the college is very difficult for them. Also, when some schools were teaching the language once a week, others were teaching it twice. This shows that no serious attention was given to the teaching of Ghanaian at the lower level. Yahya-Othman (1990) said when students enter secondary education without adequate understanding and knowledge of the medium of instruction; they are hampered by linguistic deficiencies in their thinking, in their critical observation, in their questioning of ideas and facts, and in their interpretation of what is communicated to them. If we want students to be perfect in Ghanaian languages, then teachers should handle it with all the attention it deserves. They must make sure they teach all the aspects of the language to make the student knowledgeable in the language.

5.0 Conclusion

It could be noted from the review that every government in Ghana wants its own policy on education and this in so many ways have affected the educational system in the country as a whole. Also most of the authorities saw the need for studying the mother tongue as a tool for development because without the people's language, no development can be successful. However, others saw it as stumbling block for development. The chapter shows that before a child can be successful in whatever he/she does, that child must be taught in his mother tongue or a familiar language in early years of his education. The review also pointed out that foreign languages lack authenticity.

This is true because they are not the people's language. Because of this there is a lack of integration of educational goals with cultural context and African values which has contributed to the educational crisis in Africa. It was realized that when students enter secondary school without adequate understanding and knowledge of medium of instruction, they are hampered by linguistic deficiencies in thinking, critical observation, questioning of ideas and facts, and interpretation of what is communicated to them. In conclusion, policy makers should consider the importance of the child's mother tongue or language which is familiar to the child and use it as a medium of instruction in early years and even above, the child will grow to become a responsible citizen.

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