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Factors That Militate Against the Implementation of the Mother-Tongue Language Policy in Ghana

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Abstract:

The key to communication and understanding in the classroom is language. Language is the avenue through which information is shared between the learner and the teacher. It is therefore very necessary to use a language through which learners can easily understand the concept being taught by the teacher and also express themselves freely in the classroom. As a result, some countries have adopted the mother-tongue as the medium of instruction in their education sector and other sectors. Such countries have seen massive achievements and development as compared to other nations because learners are able to transfer concepts learnt in the mother-tongue easily. Ghana, as a multilingual nation with over seventy eight (78) languages (Owu-Ewie, 2006) has adopted a language policy which promotes the use of the mother-tongue as the mode of instruction from primary one to primary three while English is studied as a subject. English becomes the mode of instruction from primary four upwards and the L1 now becomes a subject of study. It is however sad to note that the mother-tongue policy continues to remain a policy on paper without it being practiced in the classroom. This paper was an attempt to identify some factors that militate against the implementation of the mother-tongue language policy in Ghana and gave some recommendations.

Keywords: Mother-tongue, language policy, L1 instruction, L2 instruction, medium of instruction

1. Introduction

One cannot separate education from language because education is given through language and language is sustained through education. Dube and Ncube (2013) are of the view that education and language rely on one other. To them, without the use of language, education cannot be attained and language cannot also survive without it being taught and used in schools. Language plays a major role in giving quality education and ensuring good communication and understanding in the classroom. Wolff (2005), states that, "Language is not everything in education but without language, everything is nothing in education." Though language is not everything in education as expressed by Wolff (2005), when it comes to choosing a language for education, there has always been a problem, especially in societies that are multilingual. A lot of developing countries continue to use a single foreign language to dominate the education sector despite their rich indigenous languages. Instruction through a language that learners do not speak or a foreign language has been called "Submersion" (Skutnab-Kangas, 2000) because it is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim.

Ideas are not in a consensus when it comes to the language to be used as medium of instruction, be it the mother-tongue (L1) or a foreign language (L2). Again, when to use any of these languages is another problem. In order to eliminate or minimize the communication problems in their schools, most nations have put in place language policies. In most multilingual nations, the bilingual education system which makes use of an indigenous language and a second language (foreign language) has been adopted. This is the system in use by most African countries of which Ghana is no exception. There are still some countries that practice the monolingual education system. They include Japan, China, and Tanzania among others. Though countries have second language policy in their educational system on paper, they are not put into practice. UNESCO (2008a) cited in Owu-Ewie (2015) indicates that some multilingual countries have constitutional clauses and even education policy documents that honour the rights of diverse groups to use their own languages and promote their own cultures, but meanwhile, the same countries lack implementation strategies that would benefit such groups in real terms.

Ghana is no exception when it comes to the non-implementation of its language policies. The language policy of Ghana states that L1 (a Ghanaian language) must be used as medium of instruction from primary one to primary three and English studied as a subject. The second part of the policy indicates that from primary four upwards, L2 (English) should be used as medium of instruction and L1 as a subject of study. However, most teachers disregard this policy and do what they like in the classroom. Teachers use English language to teach right from KG1 which is contrary to the policy. Owu-Ewie (2015), Andoh-Kumi et al. (2001) indicate that the language policy of Ghana is not adhered to at the basic level classroom. It is for this reason

that this paper looks at the factors that militate against the implementation of the mother-tongue policy in Ghana and what can be done to improve the situation.

2. Language Policy of Education in Ghana from Past to Present

A policy is a principle of behavior, conduct etc. thought to be desirable or necessary, especially as formally expressed by a government or other authoritative body (Oxford English Dictionary). Language policy is what a government does either officially through legislation, court decisions or policy to determine how languages are used, cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities or to establish the rights of individuals or groups to use and maintain language (Wikipedia). Many countries have a language policy designed to indicate which language(s) to be used and when to use. Although nations historically have used language policy most often to promote one official language at the expense of others, many countries now have policies designed to protect and promote indigenous or ethnic languages whose viability is threatened.

Ghana, as a country, does not have a one-time language policy on education. The education policy in Ghana keeps changing from one government to the other. Almost every change of government in Ghana brings about a modification or a complete change in the education policy of the country. This can be dated back to the post-colonial times, starting from the Convention People's Party (CPP) regime. Below is a brief description of the language policy on education from the post-colonial times to date.

2.1. Language Policy under the Convention People's Party (CPP) Era – (1956 – 1966)

After independence, the CPP government, under the rule of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, took over the governance of the country from the British. During this regime, some sections of the educated Ghanaians thought that the language policy used in the colonial era was a deliberate attempt to give inferior education to the natives. As a result, they reviewed the 1925 ordinance that promoted the use of L1 medium of instruction. Though different committees and commissions were set up during this era which mostly supported the former policy, English was made the language of education from the very onset of schooling. They even reduced the periods for the teaching of the Ghanaian languages in favour of English. In the experimental schools, Ghanaian language was taught once a week.

Ironically, this regime encouraged the Mass Education campaign where illiterate adults were taught through Ghanaian language (L1 medium of instruction) but discouraged L1 instruction in the formal or elementary schools where children received education. It was the very regime that was advocating for African liberation or the independence of the Black race yet it was disregarding its language which was her identity (Dzirasa, 1979).

2.1.1. Effects of This Policy

- The requirement of a credit passes in the Ghanaian language at the 'O' level before entering the training college was abandoned.
- The neglect of the Ghanaian language in favour of English brought about low level of literacy and proficiency.
- The teaching of Ghanaian language in the middle school was no longer enforced. Periods allocated for Ghanaian languages on the time table were used for other subjects. In schools where Ghanaian languages were still being taught the number of periods was reduced in favour of English.
- Parents were encouraged to speak English with their children at home at the expense of Ghanaian language.
- This brought about the influx of international schools where L2 instruction began as early as kindergarten to the neglect of the Ghanaian languages.

2.2. Language Policy under the National Liberation Council (NLC) Era – (1966 – 1969)

In the early hours of February 24, 1966, a group of officers and men of the Ghana Army, led by Lt. Colonel (later General) Emmanuel Kwasi Kotoka and Major (later General) Akwasi Amankwa Afrifa, with the active support from the police in an operation code named "Operation Cold Chop" removed Nkrumah from power while he was on a peace mission to Hanoi at the invitation of premier Ho Chi Minh (Ghanaweb.com). During this regime, they set up Education Review Committee which was chaired by Prof. Alex Kwapong (The then VC of University of Ghana, Legon). The Kwapong Committee (1966) recommended that the L1 be used as medium of instruction for the first 3 years of the primary school course and L2 instruction from Primary 4 upwards. L1 should be a subject of study in the upper levels.

When the report was presented, the government did not accept the L1 wholly. It was agreed that the L1 should be used as medium of instruction in just the first year and then change. In the cosmopolitan areas, English was to be used at the onset of education.

2.2.1. Effects of the Policy

- L1 was not regarded. Some schools even banned its usage.
- It was during this era that Ghanaian language teachers organized a conference to put their grievances before the government but the government did not heed to their resolutions

2.3. Language Policy under the Progress Party (PP) – (1969 – 1972)

The Progress Party which was led by Dr. Abrefa Busia, took over from the NLC. During this era, the Ministry of Education reviewed the recommendation of the L1 by the Kwapong committee and made it a policy (1970) as the new language policy that same year that every pupil was to learn an approved Ghanaian language from the beginning of 1971. These approved Ghanaian languages were Akan, Ewe and Ga. This policy was made compulsory on both government and private schools. All District Education Directors were empowered for its successful implementation. Teachers were posted to places where they could competently use and teach the approved Ghanaian language. The minister of education made interesting announcement on the use of the Ghanaian language that:

- The teaching of Ghanaian language was to be compulsory in the Training Colleges and that it would be examined externally to form part of certification.
- University of Cape Coast was considering introducing an undergraduate course in Ghanaian language.
- Ghanaian language was to be a compulsory subject in the lower forms in some schools.
- Ghanaian language would count towards sixth form admission.

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Though some of the aspects of this policy are still in force, the policy did not enjoy the light for long. The regime was toppled in a coup d'état in 1972.

2.4. Language Policy of the National Redemption Council (NRC) Era – (1972 – 1979)

The NRC came to power in 1972 through a coup d'état led by Colonel Ignatius Kutu Acheampong (Pobee, 1987). A year later, the government adopted the language policy of the previous government and improved upon it. These are the decisions they implemented to buttress the policy.

- The creation of the school of Ghanaian languages in 1973 at Ajumako.
- Ghanaian language was accepted as an 'A' level subject in the Ghana Education Service (GES).
- Ghanaian language was accepted as an undergraduate course in the University of Cape Coast in 1974.
- A sub-committee was set up within the National Advisory Committee on curriculum to prepare curriculum in Ghanaian languages.
- The post of the Ghanaian language Organiser was established and made substantive.

During this same regime, the Dzobo committee was set up. They submitted their report named the New Structure and Content of Education in Ghana. In their report, they proposed among other things that Ghanaian language should be made compulsory from primary to the university level and should be the medium of instruction from P1 to P3. Again, Ghanaian languages should be a compulsory subject in the lower classes at all secondary schools. Teacher trainees will be required to study one other Ghanaian language in addition to their own mother-tongue (Dzobo, 1979:3).

2.4.1. Effects of This Policy

- This regime did a lot to restore Ghanaian languages to its former glory by taking steps to implement their language policy.
- There was much improvement in teaching and learning.
- Rote learning was minimized.
- More teaching and learning materials and literature in Ghanaian languages were produced.
- There was improvement in the human resource because more people were encouraged to pursue Ghanaian language to the university level

2.5. Language Policy under the People's National Party (PNP) – (1979 – 1981)

The People's National Party which was led by Dr. Hilla Limann, took over from the NRC as the ruling party in 24th September, 1979 (Pobee, 1987). This regime did not have interest in any language policy so they abandoned most of the things they came to meet. Their lukewarm attitude towards Ghanaian language crippled its status. They viewed the previous government's policy as sabotage to proper education. However, they did not stay long to come out with any policy of theirs.

2.6. Language Policy on Education from 1981 to Present

From 1981 to 2002, the language policy on education was that a Ghanaian language was to be used as medium of instruction for the first three years of education. A Ghanaian language in this case is the language of the locality which includes

one of the following: Akan (Fante and Twi), Nzema, Ga, Ga-Adangbe, Ewe, Gonja, Kasem, Dagbani and Dagaare (Owu-Ewie, 2006).

From 2002 to 2007, the policy was changed and the new policy stated that English was to be used as the medium of instruction from primary one, with a Ghanaian language studied as a compulsory subject to the Senior High School (Ameyaw-Akumfi, 2002). By this policy, Ghanaian language was to be studied as a subject right from the onset while English becomes the medium of instruction.

In the 2007 edition of the National Policy on education, it is stated that the medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years thus from primary one to primary three, and that during this period, English shall be taught as a subject. Then from primary four upwards, English shall be used as the medium of instruction while the language of the immediate environment now becomes a subject of study (Ghana Education Service website). The language of the environment is by implication, the mother tongue or L1.

Though this policy has been on paper for some years and is backed by law, it is not being pursued with any seriousness anywhere in the country. English has remained the language of instruction despite the policy statement. The following are therefore some of the factors fighting against the implementation of the mother-tongue language policy.

3. Factors Militating Against the Implementation of Mother-Tongue Language Policy in Ghana

Like most African countries, Ghana suffers from high degree of linguistic diversity with a population of over twenty nine million people (Worldometers.info). According to Owu-Ewie (2006; 2015), there are about seventy eight (78) local languages spoken in Ghana. The linguistic map of Ghana shows that Ghana is a multi-lingual nation. There are diverse ethnic groups with their varying languages in each of the regions of Ghana (Wikipedia). As a result, a country like Ghana just like many countries in the world, due to their multi-lingual nature, have problems in assigning roles to languages.

The national language policy on education is very explicit yet, the implementation has been faced with a lot of challenges. Here are some of the challenges fighting against the implementation of the mother-tongue language policy in Ghana.

3.1. Insufficient Human Resource

Teachers or personnel who are well versed in the language to teach it are not enough or adequate. When it comes to the implementation of any curriculum package or education policy, teachers play a vital role. A teacher's ability to use his own mother tongue to teach is different from a teacher being trained to use his mother tongue to teach. In Ghana, very few people enroll to be trained in the mother tongue or L1. Most teacher trainees do not show any interest in the Ghanaian languages hence ignoring their study. When such teachers come out as teachers to teach in the schools, they become less empowered to use the mother tongue to teach hence the use of English language.

3.2. Insufficient L1 Instructional Materials

Instructional materials in the L1 such as textbooks, workbooks, supplementary readers, Teaching and Learning material (TLMs) are not enough or sometimes not available to aid the use of L1 as the medium of instruction as compared to the L2. For effective teaching and learning to take place, necessary materials for teaching and learning should be available. The fact remains that books and other teaching materials that will enhance the teaching and learning of mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment are very limited hence the preference of teachers to use English language which has teaching and learning materials in abundance.

3.3. The Problem of Writing or Translating Various Subjects into L1

Certain subjects have very technical terms that cannot be translated into L1 or are very difficult to translate into L1. Subjects such as the sciences have technical terms that are very difficult to get appropriate words in the L1 to replace hence the preference of using the L2.

3.4. Linguistically Mixed Population in the Classroom

Taking into account that Ghana is a cosmopolitan or multilingual and multicultural nation, almost every classroom has pupils that speak different L1 languages. It becomes virtually impossible to find a classroom that is made up of learners from one linguistic group particularly in the urban areas. In Cape Coast, Accra, Kumasi and Takoradi for instance, there are so many ethnic groups with different languages and dialects. The composition of a classroom in Cape Coast can be made up of over four linguistic groups – Akan (Fante and Twi), Ga, Ewe and Gur languages. In such a situation, which indigenous language can be used as the medium of instruction? Therefore, identifying an indigenous language to use in a linguistically mixed classroom is a major factor hindering the implementation of the mother-tongue language policy in Ghana particularly in the urban settings.

3.5. The Negative Perception of Some Teachers, Pupils, Parents, and Opinion Leaders about L1 Instruction

Some teachers are not enthusiastic to use L1 as medium of instruction with the belief that education in L1 is inferior and that it should be the function of the home and not the school. Most children use the English language as their first language (L1). Such children enter the lower primary classes knowing nothing about their mother-tongue or the language of the environment they live in (Marilyn, 2013). They cannot speak nor grasp any utterance spoken in the language that the policy is

advocating for its use as a language of instruction. Of what importance then will it be to teach a child in a language s/he knows nothing about? Parents on their part do not even want their children to speak their mother tongue if not, why should a parent be communicating in English language with his or her ward? A parent that does not want his or her child to speak the native language will certainly not want that child to be taught in such native language. Right from the time of the early missionaries, the indigenous people had always wanted and indeed encouraged their children to learn English (Fafunwa, 1974 in Abubakar, 2003). This attitude is still very much in place and thus hinders the implementation of the language policy statement.

3.6. Posting Teachers without Considering the L1 of the Teacher and That of the Place S/He Is Being Posted to

This is another factor militating against the implementation of the mother tongue policy. Most at times, when teacher trainees finish their training and they are being posted to their respective places of work, the ministry in charge does not consider the L1 of the teachers and where they are being posted to. Most of them are sent to places they cannot speak nor write the indigenous language being used there. Inasmuch as the teacher is not able to use the language of where s/he has been posted to, s/he will surely be using the English language for convenience.

4. Recommendation

If the following measures are put in place, the policy will move from policy to practice:

- Adequate teaching and learning materials in the L1 should be provided to aid in the teaching and learning of the L1 to be used as the medium of instruction.
- The learning of the L1 of the immediate environment in the various teacher training colleges should be made compulsory to all teacher trainees and not an option. Colleges of Education and Faculties of Education in the Universities should plan language education courses for all the major languages used in Ghana so that would-be teachers will be trained to have rudimentary knowledge of their mother-tongue as well as the language of the immediate environment.
- Parents, pupils, teachers and the general public should be educated on the importance of upholding their mother-tongue in order to enable them change their attitude towards indigenous languages.
- There should be laid down rules and regulations backing the policy. Defaulters at all levels should be sanctioned. Again, an effective and efficient monitoring team should be delegated to ensure that mother-tongue or the language of the environment is used strictly in teaching pupils at the lower primary level of education.
- When posting teachers to their respective workplaces, their L1 should be taken into consideration.

5. Conclusion

It is true that Ghana as a nation has a language policy on education on paper which is backed by laws but unless the above factors are tackled and appropriate measures put in place, the language policy for the lower primary level of education will continue to be a mere policy on paper, not practiced in the classroom.

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