

Language as a Pedagogical Tool: An Assessment of the Language Policy in Ghanaian Lower Primary Schools

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Abstract

Language is the core of general education. Subjects cannot be taught or learnt without language. This paper examines practical issues of implementation of language policy in Ghanaian lower primary schools. A survey using questionnaire and observations were used in order to gather primary data from 5 selected schools in the Kumasi metropolis. The study finds out that in assessing the implementation of language policy, it is important however to consider the age of the pupils in order to give credence to the best age of learning a language. In this regard, the study finds out that pupils who are within the age range of 6-10 years are found in the lower primary school, from KG-Class 3. Regarding the use of instructional language in lower primary schools, the study finds out that all the teachers use English language to teach, except in some cases some teachers in the private schools present, demonstrate and explain some subject topics using the local languages while most of their compatriots in the public school claim they present, demonstrate and explain either all or some subject topics in English. Significantly, the teachers consider that teaching pupils in the local language has a positive impact on assimilating the subject of consideration. The study however concludes that teachers who are limited in their use of local language may find it difficult to achieve the ultimate goal of teaching pupils to understand the subject. This study therefore recommends among others that both English and local languages should be used simultaneously to teach the pupils for the benefit of all.

Keywords: Instructional Language; Pedagogy; Policy; Implementation; Teachers.

1. Introduction

Knowledge is power. However, the transmission of that power is through language. Unfortunately, Bodomo (1999) reported of some young agricultural extension officers and their experiences on one of their first field trips. These young African experts graduated from one of the universities in Africa and were ready to impart new farming technologies to rural farmers in various areas of their country. On the very first day of their jobs, they came to terms with one issue which had apparently been neglected in the course of their training: language, that most important tool of communication. In spite of all the academic theorizing about sharing new technologies with the indigenous people, apparently nobody ever thought that these scholars were going to start working with people, the majority of whom did not communicate in their language of education, in the language in which all the wonderful theories of agricultural extension were propounded.

On this account, to appreciate the worth, value and role of language, it is necessary at this point to identify language as a vehicle and effective pedagogical tool of a community through which people's culture is transmitted based on oral and written symbols. Kaplan (2017) therefore explains that language is how individuals communicate, acquire knowledge, and work with others. It is how societies pass on culture and institutions, import new ideas and technology, and forge links among members. It can act as an instrument of empowerment, advancement, and influence how societies evolve.

A pedagogical tool is in this study to be any medium that a person uses to teach or learn. This is designed to convey important lessons or allow people to improve upon their understanding. Language is the core of general education, as subjects cannot be taught and learnt without language. This paper, in an attempt to address language as a pedagogical tool, examines practical issues of implementation of language policy in Ghanaian primary schools. The premise of the study is based on the Ghana Education Service policy on the use of local language in teaching Kindergarteners (KG) through to class 3.

1.1 Language Policy in Ghanaian Education

Distinctively, Ghana is a multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual setting such that the most obvious way that the indigenous Ghanaian culture is preserved or expressed is through the many languages that are spoken. Even though, advancements have been made to educate pupils in their indigenous languages, the Ghanaian school is characterized as a storehouse of languages with linguistic diversity, where the teacher is task to communicate to the understanding of the entire pupils in order to establish understanding of the subject. According to Pool (n.d) language diversity may mean that there are a number of different languages spoken in a given area.

In a typical Ghanaian lower primary school, the pupils are from diversity of linguistic, geographical and cultural backgrounds. The linguistic diversity reflects the existence of multitude of languages which accounts for the need of language policy to bring about internal cohesion, integration, unity and pupils'

participation in the classroom. In order to achieve these, the Ghana Education Service considers the institution of language policy as important to the recognition of mother tongue education.

Owing to this, an attempt was made many years after Ghana's independence in 1957 to educate pupils from Kindergarten through to class 3 in their indigenous languages. During this time, language of instruction in the primary school is initially in the child's mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, before instruction was exclusively delivered in English, beginning from class 4.

Then, in 2001, the government adopted an English-only policy for education and indigenous languages disappeared as languages of instruction in schools.

Another switch occurred in 2007-2008, when the national pendulum swung back toward multi-lingualism. Once again, the Ghana Education Service policy is that Kindergarteners through to class 3 pupils learn in their local language and have English as one subject, then shift to English exclusively in class 4.

1.2 Language and National Development

National development has been defined as a situation whereby people harness the resources at their disposal in order to have meaningful life. It is the development of individuals in a nation (Olaoye, 2013). According to Kaplan, (2017) in the least developed countries, language policy should therefore aim at maximizing the ability of a population to acquire knowledge so as to increase education levels and productivity.

Despite the fact that language is regarded as one of the most neglected areas in the development field (Kaplan, 2017), some studies have been done by different scholars around the globe to establish the relation between language and development (Bodomo, 1999; Kaplan, 2017; Olaoye, 2013; Tarhom). For instance, according to (Language and National Development: The Case of India, n.d.) national development and language are irrevocably connected. This is because development indices such as internal cohesion, integration, unity, economic wellbeing and citizens' participation in governance are promoted through languages. In this regard, language can be seen as the functional tool, interwoven with education, religion, culture, politics, region, ethnicity, profession, and socio-economic activities through urbanization, industrialization, and modernization (Olaoye, 2013).

Pool (n.d.) characterised the role of language in national development by focussing on language diversity. The literature contains that language diversity of one sort or another is held to cause the retardation of development, in all sectors. This is because language diversity is claimed to aggravate political sectionalism; hinders inter-group co-operation, national unity, and regional multinational co-operation; impedes political enculturation, political support for the authorities and the regime, and political participation; and holds down governmental effectiveness and political stability. Similarly, it is said that language diversity slows economic development, by braking occupational mobility, reducing the number of people available for mobilization into the modern sector of the economy, decreasing efficiency, and preventing the diffusion of innovative techniques.

It was further criticized in the literature that societies not undergoing much development tend to maintain language diversity by isolating members of different language groups from communication with each other. Also, inadequate level of attention that has often been given to language situation tends to reflect on the low level of national development (Tarhom, n.d.). Bodomo, (1999) however observed that the other problem why the language issue has not featured well in Africa's development discourse is that the nature and role of language in society is often completely misunderstood.

In this regard, Kaplan (2017) defined language policy as 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 languages.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the demographic characteristics of pupils in the lower primary schools in Ghana.
2. To assess the use of instructional language in the lower primary schools in Ghana.
3. To find out the impact of instructional language in teaching and learning in lower primary schools in Ghana.

1.4 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the demographic characteristics of pupils in the lower primary schools?
2. What is the instructional language used in the lower primary schools?
3. What is the impact of instructional language in teaching and learning in lower primary schools?

2. Materials and Methods

This section presents the methodology which according to Ato-Kumi (2016) refers to all procedures that aid data generation, collection, recording and analysis.

The study is a quantitative study which employed the descriptive method. Creswell (1994) suggests that descriptive study intends to present facts about the nature and status of a situation as it exists at the time of the study. In addition, it concerns the relationships and practices that exists, beliefs and processes that are ongoing. Therefore, it was helpful to describe the current situation of language policy in Ghanaian education based on the impressions and perceptions of the respondents of the study.

From the population of the study, it became necessary to choose a sizable number to work with through sampling. A sample size of approximately 206 was determined using the Yamane's formula.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e^2)} = \frac{424}{1+424(0.05^2)} = 205.82$$

Where:

N = Population

l = Constant

e = Margin of error

n = Sample size

The sample size was based on 5% error margin and 95% confidence interval.

However, a total of 181 pupils and 25 teachers were randomly selected from 5 different schools where observations were also carried out. A survey using questionnaire and observations were used in order to gather primary data from the respondents. Furthermore, a total of were also selected to respond to questionnaire in the selected schools.

The data collected from the questionnaire were coded numerically and analysed using SPSS. In the analysis, a cross tabulation of descriptive analysis was used. The outcome of the analysis was presented in tables with frequencies and percentages. In the analysis, each subscript letter denotes a subset of the variables whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

3. Results and Discussions

The study which sought to address language as a pedagogical tool by examining practical issues in the implementation of language policy in Ghanaian lower primary schools drew a population of Pupils and Teachers in the lower primary, from the Kindergarten up to Class Three (3). The study was conducted between two categories of schools which are described as public schools and private schools. From the survey, out of the 181 questionnaire administered to the pupils, 142 was successful. Additionally, 15 questionnaire were also retrieved from the 25 teachers. These were used in the analysis and represent 76.21% coverage of data collection. The descriptive statistics of data analysis was used to analyse the data and inferences were made.

From the two categories of schools, it was revealed that both the public and private schools employ a system of teaching in the lower primary where one teacher teaches all the subjects in a class. This system of teaching is different from subject teaching where one teacher teaches one subject at a time. The study reveals that each of the teachers is expected to teach for a minimum of 5 hours and maximum of 8 hours in a day.

The study reveals that the teachers teaching the pupils come from varied background with each having a unique spoken language. In the private schools 57.1% against 25% of teachers in the public schools, respectively claim they can speak or understand the local language used in the community where their school is located.

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Pupils in Ghanaian Lower Primary Schools

The study finds out that in assessing the implementation of language policy, it is important however to consider the age of the pupils in order to give credence to the best age of learning a language. It is remarkable in this order to note that the demographic analysis of the respondents shows that most of the pupils sampled for the study fall within the ages of 6-10 representing 73.9%. This finding is significant as it reveals that in Ghana pupils who are at ages 6-10 can be found in lower primary schools ranging from KG up to Class 3.

Probing further, the study reveals in Table 1 that the pupils in the Kindergarten are more than those in the remaining three classes. In most of the schools visited the researchers realized that the Kindergarten is divided into two which include KG1 and KG2. These classes are grouped according to the ages of the pupils. This study confirms that, in Ghana enrolment rates at various levels of education vary greatly and drop sharply as one ascends the education ladder. The study of The Forum for Education Reform (IMANI) (2013) says that, at the primary school level, the nation is achieving about 95% of enrolment which is good. At the Junior High School (JHS) level, the rate drops to about 78% and even sharper decline occurs between the JHS and Senior High School (SHS) levels where the rate of enrolment falls below 40%. At the Tertiary level, only 12% of the population of tertiary age is enrolled. The percentage indicated in this section may however be used to determine

how many of the pupils enrolled in this study can go through their education up to the tertiary level when the percentage are applied to their enrolment.

3.2 The use of Instructional Language in Lower Primary Schools

In the review of literature it was identified that there are more than 250 languages and dialects spoken in Ghana. English is the country's official language and the standard language used for educational instruction (Embassy of Ghana - The Hague, 2017). In this section, the researchers sought to find out which language do the pupils speak best, if English is said to be the standard language used for educational instruction. A question that may be raised is that how best can the pupils speak or express themselves in the classroom using the English language. The finding of the study however revealed that most of the pupils speak Twi, which had $n=83$ counts representing 58.5% of the pupils. This may be partly due to the fact that the sampled districts for the study have Twi, Dagomba and Hausa as the common languages spoken by most of the people. This notwithstanding, the finding of this study may also be applied to other metropolis where other Ghanaian languages are commonly spoken. Statistically, Table 2 shows that apart from Twi, Hausa is the second language spoken by most of the pupils. This was counted among $n=27$ pupils and represents 19%. In the study, it was noticed that only 16.9% ($n=24$) of the pupils indicated that they can speak English fluently. However, this study does not undermine the fact that the pupils are not able to speak the other languages they failed to indicate. It was realized that at least some of the pupil can express themselves in some of the other languages but not satisfactorily.

In all the classes observed, the finding of the study reveals in Table 3 that English is used by the teachers to teach their pupils. Inferring from Table 5a and Table 5b, this study reveals that the use of English by teachers in lower primary has the tendency to affect interaction between the teacher and the pupils which may undermine understanding of the subject being studied. As a result of this, Table 6 indicates that the pupils are found to interact more with their parent(s) in their local language than they do with their teachers. This finding implies that when the pupils are required to express themselves they can do it better in Twi than all the other languages.

A comparison was made to find out from the teachers whether their schools ensure that pupils in the Kindergarten up to Class 3 are taught in their local languages or not. It was seen that 75% of teachers in the public schools answered "YES" and 85.6% of the teachers in private schools answered "No". Regarding the use of instructional language in lower primary schools, the study finds out that all the teachers use English language to teach, except in some cases some teachers representing only 6.7% in the private schools present, demonstrate and explain some subject topics using the local languages while most of their compatriots in the public school claim they present, demonstrate and explain either all or some subject topics in English.

In this study, the researchers discovered that both the public and private schools have systems that deter the use of the local language by their pupils. In some of the schools visited, there are inscriptions such as "SPEAK ENGLISH" on the walls of the schools, both outside and inside the classrooms.

It is obvious that language proficiency is the outcome of a repeated activity. How often a person speaks and hears a language goes a long way to facilitate its proficiency. This is further made easier if the person interacts with people who can also speak and understand the language. In respect to the directive of the Ghana Education Service, which directs that teachers should use local language as a medium of instruction in KG-Class 3, other studies which investigated this said children who are taught in their mother tongues tend to grasp educational concepts and principles faster and easier than they do when taught in other languages. It has also been established that the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in early grades of education sets the tone for effective acquisition of any other language (Baffoe & Amoah, 2015).

In a follow up question, the pupils were required to indicate how frequent they speak their local languages, this study discovered, as shown in Table 4, approximately 33.8% representing $n=48$ pupils always speak Twi when in school.

3.3 The Impact of Instructional Language in Teaching and Learning

The outcome of any lesson is geared towards establishing understanding of the subject and being able to apply the knowledge acquired in its assessment. Therefore it is important to adopt the right medium of communication, which in this study refers to a local language as directed by the Ghana Education Service, to teach the pupils. The outcome of this study reveals that teachers who use only local language when teaching the Ghanaian Language subject have most of their pupils having greater understanding of the subject. In teaching the other subjects, the study reveals that an understanding of the subject is mostly achieved by teachers who present, demonstrate and explain some subject topics in both local language and at the same time in English.

It is remarkable to notice from Table 5a that from the KG to Class 3, most of the pupils understood Twi. Cumulatively, 51.4% ($n=73$) responded that they have adequate understanding in Twi. From the results, it right is therefore to conclude that teaching in a language which the pupils can understand aids the teaching process and facilitates understanding of the subject.

In view of how many of the pupils have adequate understanding of the languages they speak, the cross tabulation in Table 5b shows that 65.1% (n=54) of the pupils can adequately speak and understand Twi whereas 54.2% (n=13) of the pupils who speak English well can adequately understand Twi. This implies that there are more pupils who speak and understand Twi adequately than those who speak and understand English or any other language in the study.

At same point, the study discloses in Table 6 that the pupils who speak Twi mostly speak with their parent(s) and teachers. This was confirmed by 63.9% (n=53) of the pupils who said they speak the language with their parent(s) and 19.3% (n=16) who said they speak with their teachers. However, it was realized that the pupils interact more with their parent(s) than their teachers.

From Table 7, approximately 72.4% (n=42) of the pupils in the KG and 75% (n=21) in Class 1 indicated that they do not understand the lessons taught by their teachers.

Significantly, 85.7% of the teachers in the private school against 75% of teachers in the public schools consider that teaching pupils in the local language has a positive impact on assimilating the subject of consideration. This shows that the use of the local language in schools must be embraced and practiced to the benefit of both the teacher and pupils.

Conclusion

This study concludes that teaching does not occur in a vacuum, it must undergo its refinery process to be able to achieve its objectives. Within the teaching spectrum, there is a teacher disseminating information to pupils who later produce feedback to the teacher. It is a well-structured cycle with the players (teacher and pupils) interacting within a structured environment which permits participation of objects. However there are certain factors that inhibit its successful delivery, of which language is a key factor. Teachers who are limited in their use of local language may find it difficult to achieve the ultimate goal of teaching pupils to understand the subject and be able to apply it.

As part of the successful implementation of policies, it is necessary for the policy makers to offer training to the people concerned in order to have smooth implementation of the policy. Even though this study reveals that teachers in the public schools have had training in using the local language to teach their classes, implementation of that policy is however not satisfactory.

However in this study, the frequency of the number of teachers who indicated that indeed they support that pupils in the kindergarten up to class 3 are taught in their local languages, suggests that both public and private school teachers endorse the policy.

Recommendations

This study makes two important recommendations based on the outcome of the study that both English and local languages should be used simultaneously to teach pupils in the lower primary school for the benefit of all. Secondly, training programmes should be scheduled and extended to include both public and private school teachers on the use of instructional language in the lower primary.

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Table 1. Classes and ages of pupils

			Ages			Total
			1-5	6-10	11-15	
Class	KG	Count	30 _a	28 _b	0 _b	58
		%	51.7%	48.3%	0.0%	100.0%
Class 1	Class 1	Count	0 _a	28 _b	0 _{a, b}	28
		%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Class 2	Class 2	Count	0 _a	28 _b	7 _c	35
		%	0.0%	80.0%	20.0%	100.0%
Class 3	Class 3	Count	0 _a	21 _b	0 _{a, b}	21
		%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Total	Total	Count	30	105	7	142
		%	21.1%	73.9%	4.9%	100.0%

Table 2. Best spoken languages of pupils in various classes

			Best spoken languages of pupils				Total
			Twi	English	Dagomba	Hausa	
Class	KG	Count	37 _a	7 _a	1 _a	13 _a	58
		%	63.8%	12.1%	1.7%	22.4%	100.0%
Class 1	Class 1	Count	19 _a	7 _a	0 _a	2 _a	28
		%	67.9%	25.0%	0.0%	7.1%	100.0%
Class 2	Class 2	Count	17 _a	8 _a	0 _a	10 _a	35
		%	48.6%	22.9%	0.0%	28.6%	100.0%
Class 3	Class 3	Count	10 _a	2 _a	7 _b	2 _a	21
		%	47.6%	9.5%	33.3%	9.5%	100.0%
Total	Total	Count	83	24	8	27	142
		%	58.5%	16.9%	5.6%	19.0%	100.0%

Table 3. Teachers' use of Language in Classes

			Teachers use of Language in class	Total
			English	
Class	KG	Count	58	58
		%	100.0%	100.0%
Class 1	Class 1	Count	28	28
		%	100.0%	100.0%
Class 2	Class 2	Count	35	35
		%	100.0%	100.0%
Class 3	Class 3	Count	21	21
		%	100.0%	100.0%
Total	Total	Count	142	142
		%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4. How often the pupil speak their local languages

			How frequent do you speak the language				Total
			Always, when in school	When in school but not always	Always, at home	At home but not always	
Class	KG	Count	21 _a	0 _b	37 _a	0 _b	58
		%	36.2%	0.0%	63.8%	0.0%	100.0%
Class 1	Class 1	Count	14 _a	0 _a	7 _a	7 _a	28
		%	50.0%	0.0%	25.0%	25.0%	100.0%
Class 2	Class 2	Count	6 _a	15 _b	14 _a	0 _a	35
		%	17.1%	42.9%	40.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Class 3	Class 3	Count	7 _a	0 _a	1 _a	13 _b	21
		%	33.3%	0.0%	4.8%	61.9%	100.0%
Total	Total	Count	48	15	59	20	142
		%	33.8%	10.6%	41.5%	14.1%	100.0%

Table 5a. The language pupils understand best

			Language best understood by pupils				Total
			Twi	English	Dagomba	Hausa	
Class	KG	Count	23 _a	21 _{a, b}	0 _a	14 _b	58
		%	39.7%	36.2%	0.0%	24.1%	100.0%
Class 1	Class 1	Count	21 _a	7 _{a, b}	0 _{a, b}	0 _b	28
		%	75.0%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Class 2	Class 2	Count	21 _a	7 _a	0 _a	7 _a	35
		%	60.0%	20.0%	0.0%	20.0%	100.0%
Class 3	Class 3	Count	8 _a	6 _a	7 _b	0 _a	21
		%	38.1%	28.6%	33.3%	0.0%	100.0%
Total	Total	Count	73	41	7	21	142
		%	51.4%	28.9%	4.9%	14.8%	100.0%

Table 5b. Understanding and speaking of the Local Languages

			Language best understood by pupils				Total
			Twi	English	Dagomba	Hausa	
Best spoken languages of pupils	Twi	Count	54 _a	26 _a	0 _b	3 _b	83
		%	65.1%	31.3%	0.0%	3.6%	100.0%
	English	Count	13 _a	9 _a	0 _a	2 _a	24
		%	54.2%	37.5%	0.0%	8.3%	100.0%
Dagomba	Count	0 _a	1 _a	7 _b	0 _a	8	
	%	0.0%	12.5%	87.5%	0.0%	100.0%	
Hausa	Count	6 _a	5 _a	0 _a	16 _b	27	
	%	22.2%	18.5%	0.0%	59.3%	100.0%	
Total	Total	Count	73	41	7	21	142
		%	51.4%	28.9%	4.9%	14.8%	100.0%

Table 6. Language Interaction of pupils

			With whom do you speak			Total
			Parent(s)	Teacher	Others	
Best spoken language by pupils	Twi	Count	53 _a	16 _a	14 _a	83
		%	63.9%	19.3%	16.9%	100.0%
	English	Count	13 _{a, b}	11 _b	0 _a	24
		%	54.2%	45.8%	0.0%	100.0%
Dagomba	Count	7 _a	1 _a	0 _a	8	
	%	87.5%	12.5%	0.0%	100.0%	
Hausa	Count	13 _a	7 _a	7 _a	27	
	%	48.1%	25.9%	25.9%	100.0%	
Total	Count	86	35	21	142	
	%	60.6%	24.6%	14.8%	100.0%	

Table 7. Pupils' understanding of lessons

			Understanding of lessons		Total
			Yes	No	
Class	KG	Count	42 _a	16 _a	58
		%	72.4%	27.6%	100.0%
	Class 1	Count	21 _a	7 _a	28
		%	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
	Class 2	Count	28 _a	7 _a	35
		%	80.0%	20.0%	100.0%
	Class 3	Count	21 _a	0 _b	21
		%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	112	30	142	
	%	78.9%	21.1%	100.0%	