Language of Instruction in the African Classroom: Key Issues, Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract Language of instruction is a topic of great interest in current international education and development discourse, particularly as it applies to early-grade reading. As a result, African language-medium instruction has received increased attention from international education donors and stakeholders in the last 10+ years. This chapter examines some of the complexities of local language-medium education programming, particularly in African contexts. It provides an overview of key program features, identifies the most common challenges that arise in developing such programs, and suggests some tested ways of meeting those challenges.

1 Introduction: Language and Learning in Sub-Saharan Africa

In current international education and development discourse, language of instruction is a topic of great interest. Particularly in the area of early-grade reading, the role of language in learning has taken on special focus. Learning assessments in classrooms of the global South have revealed drastically poor learning outcomes, especially among

The production of this paper was supported by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as part of the Science of Teaching grant. (An adapted, abridged version of this paper has been published as *Practical Language Choices for Improving Foundational Literacy and Numeracy in Sub-Saharan Africa,* by W. Ralaingita, B. Trudell, B. Piper and M. Dubeck (2021))

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R. M. Joshi et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Literacy in Africa*, Literacy Studies 24,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26250-0_5

children living in the multi-language contexts of low- and middle-income African nations. The typical use of international languages of instruction from the early grades is not giving children the skills that will allow them to be successful learners.

In response, African language-medium instruction has received new attention from international education donors and stakeholders in the last 10 years. Early grade reading programming in local languages has become a regular feature of large-scale education projects, and it is featuring more frequently in smaller, more local education projects as well. Much has been learned about best practice in local language-medium programming, and the learning is still going on.

This chapter examines some of the complexities of local language-medium education programming in African contexts. It provides an overview of key program features, identifies the most common challenges that arise in developing such a program, and suggests some tested ways of meeting those challenges.

1.1 Relevant Language Terminology

The rich linguistic environment of African contexts, and of the global South in general, has given rise to a range of terms related to how various types of languages are used in educational programming. Not all of these terms have the same meanings in every African context, so it is important to understand how they are used. Table 1 below describes some of the more common terms related to multi-language environments, and the African contexts in which they are found.[1]

It can be seen from the table above that descriptors of language span the political, geographical and personal, and that many of them are subject to the perspective of the speaker.[2] The notion of first, second, or more languages can be quite fluid in the life of a multilingual person; similarly, the geographical identification of particular languages as "local", "regional" or "national" may depend on where the speaker is standing. This subjectivity of terms does not imply that the distinctions are not real, but it does indicate that such terms must be carefully defined for the context in which they are used.

1.2 The Education Context

Where language and learning are concerned, the greatest challenge facing African nations is the relatively low fluency of their populations in the language(s) of the formal education system. Table 2 below presents current *Ethnologue* (Eberhard

[1] Note that the terms 'native', 'dialect' and 'indigenous' are not included in this chart. They have specific linguistic and cultural meanings, but – used out of context – can be considered demeaning. Thus, their use in this discussion of language and learning is limited to specific definitions.

[2] For example, the statement that is commonly heard in urban anglophone African contexts: "I do not speak my mother tongue."

Table 1 Language terms and their meaning in African contexts[a]

Term	Meaning	Additional information
National language	Official language (anglophone contexts) African language (francophone contexts)	Contrasts with 'local' or 'regional' language Contrasts with 'international' language
Mother tongue, home language, first language (L1)	Language that a person learns first and speaks best as a child	Over time, people's fluencies in other languages may equal or surpass their fluency in the home language
Local language, language of the immediate environment	Language of the geographical community	Contrasts with regional or official/national languages
Regional language	African language spoken widely, but not across the entire country	Contrasts with language(s) recognized as official/national
Second/third (etc.) language (L2, L3 etc.)	Language which is not spoken as the first language of a given person or group	May (or may not) be an officially recognized language of the nation
Foreign language	Language which is not fluently spoken by a given person or group	Not usually an official language of the country

[a]An adapted version of this table appears in Ralaingita et al. (2021)

et al., 2020) figures on fluency in the official international language of the education system, for a sample of sub-Saharan African nations.

These numbers are almost certainly high compared to actual language fluencies in the primary classroom, for reasons including the self-reported data on which such figures are typically based, the practice of counting speakers whose fluency in the language is very limited, and the lack of social or classroom opportunities that school-aged children will have had to learn the international language. This last feature is far more pronounced among children in rural and low-resource environments.

With this sample range of 5–54% (at the very most, in each case) of populations speaking the international language of formal schooling, and given that the international-language fluency rates of school-aged children are even lower, it is clear that language of instruction is a significant factor in education quality and learning outcomes.

In these contexts, national formal education policy in Africa typically gives one of two common curriculum responses:

1. Use of a limited number of local languages of instruction in lower primary, with a transition to the international official language as language of instruction in upper primary. UNESCO (2016: 5) reports that, as of 2015, 38 African nations out of 47 had a policy in place permitting the use of local languages in the primary grades.
2. Use of the official international language of education, from lower primary through tertiary education.

In a few countries, such as Ethiopia and Tanzania, African languages are used as the medium of instruction through the primary grades (Trudell, 2016).

Table 2 Populations speaking the official international language: sample African nations (*Ethnologue* 2020, with dates of the population counts in parentheses)[a]

Country	Population in millions	Official international language	Population speaking the official international language in millions	Percentage of population speaking the official international language
Burkina Faso	19.7 (2018)	French	4.2 (2016)	21%
Central African Republic	4.7 (2017)	French	1.3 (2016)	28%
Cote d'Ivoire	24.3 (2017)	French	8.1 (2017)	33%
Democratic Republic of the Congo	84.0 (2018)	French	31.9 (2017)	38%
Ethiopia	108.4 (2018)	Amharic (Amharic is not an 'international' language as such; but it has been the national language of instruction for many decades and so is included here) English	56.9 (2018) 0.17 (2010) (likely to be higher today, given that the English fluency rates are based on a 2010 national census.)	52% 0.01%
Ghana	28.8 (2017)	English	9.8 (2010)	34% (likely to be higher today, given that the English fluency rates are based on a 2010 national census.)
Liberia	4.8 (2018)	English	2.6 (2004)	54% (Not very reliable, given that the English fluency rates are based on 2004 figures)
Malawi	17.6 (2018)	English	0.88 (2016)	5%
Mali	19.4 (2018)	French	3.0 (2018)	15%
Mozambique	29.7 (2017)	Portuguese	10.2 (2016)	34%
Niger	21.5 (2017)	French	2.5 (2016)	12%
Nigeria	195.9 (2019)	English	104.0 (2018)	53%

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Country	Population in millions	Official international language	Population speaking the official international language in millions	Percentage of population speaking the official international language
Rwanda	12.2 (2017)	English	1.5 (2010)	12% (Likely to be higher today, given that the English fluency rates are based on a 2010 national census)
Senegal	15.9 (2017)	French	4.4 (2017)	28%
Sierra Leone	7.6 (2017)	English	0.9 (2017)	12%
South Africa	57.7 (2018)	English Afrikaans (Afrikaans is not an 'international' language such as English, French and Portuguese are; however, its history in the education system of South Africa merits its inclusion here. These numbers do not indicate speakers who only speak one language or the other; bilingualism in the two languages is high, especially among the Afrikaaner and 'British' South African populations)	15.9 (2013) 17.1 (2013)	28% 30%
Tanzania	55.4 (2018)	English	6.0 (2016)	11%
Zambia	17.1 (2017)	English	3.0 (2017)	18%

[a]An adapted version of this table appears in Ralaingita et al. (2021)

1.3 Models of Language Use in the Classroom

In African contexts, several models can be found for the use of more than one language of instruction in the formal curriculum. These models revolve around three themes: (1) the numbers and types of languages in the curriculum; (2) the use that is made of the L1 in the curriculum; and (3) the year at which the L1-medium instruction is transitioned to L2-medium instruction. See Table 3 below.

Table 3 Models of L1 use in formal education contexts in Africa[a]

Model	Meaning	Comments	Country examples of where this model is found
Multi-language education			
Bilingual education (BE)	The use of two languages in an education program	May include one L1 and one L2, or two non-L1 languages	Cameroon (French and English) Kenya (English and Kiswahili)
Multilingual education (MLE)	The use of two or more languages in an education program	May or may not include an L1; may include two or more non-L1 languages	Ethiopia (local language, English, Amharic) Nigeria (English, regional Nigerian language, Arabic)
Mother tongue-based MLE (MTB-MLE)	The use of two or more languages in an education program, one of which is the L1 of the pupil	L1 is always one of the languages	Ethiopia (local language, English, Amharic) Uganda (local language, English)
Use of the L1			
L1 as subject	Teaching L1 language arts as a subject in the curriculum	This is how most MTB-MLE is framed in the curriculum	Kenya ("mother tongue subject") Nigeria
Reading (in L1) as subject	Reading instruction in the L1	Rare to find 'reading' as a subject in African curricula	Uganda (literacy I and II in local language)
L1 across the curriculum	L1 as medium of instruction for all subjects (except L2)		Ethiopia
L1-L2 transition models (other models exist of dual language use in primary schools; however, they are rare in African contexts and are not included here)			
Early-exit BE or MLE	Transition from L1 to L2 as medium of instruction in grade 4 or earlier	The most common MTB-MLE model found in African national language policy	Senegal Mozambique Niger
Late-exit BE or MLE	Transition from L1 to L2 as medium of instruction at the end of primary (grade 5 or higher)		Ethiopia

[a]An adapted version of this table appears in Ralaingita et al. (2021)

These models interact in MTB-MLE program implementation, particularly the two transition models and the two models for L1 use in the classroom. Table 4 describes the features of the four possible MTB-MLE program types, and the advantages and disadvantages of each. At this time, the most common L1-medium

Table 4 Four MTB-MLE program types[a]

	Early exit (grade 3 or 4)	Late exit (end of primary)
L1 as reading instruction only	*Advantages:* Good reading skills gained Good affective outcomes in early grades *Disadvantages:* No evidence of strong long-term academic outcomes No impact on L2 learning	*Advantages:* Good reading skills gained Long-term L1 language arts development is possible *Disadvantages:* Comprehension does not necessarily transfer to L2 subjects
L1 across curriculum	*Advantages:* Good early-grades content learning Good affective outcomes in early grades *Disadvantages:* Not enough L2 learning for strong transition Research evidence: Learning gains diminish by grade 5	*Advantages:* Good content learning Time for strong L2 learning Research evidence: Leads to successful transition to L2-medium secondary school *Disadvantages:* Substantial policy and curricular support needed

[a]An adapted version of this table appears in Ralaingita et al. (2021)

education programming being supported by government and international non-government organizations in sub-Saharan Africa is early-exit MTB-MLE, consisting of early grade reading instruction in the L1 of the pupils. In some cases, L2 subject learning and L1-L2 transition are supported with specific teaching and learning materials.

2 Challenges to L1-Medium Programming in African Contexts

A substantial number of African states have implemented one or more of the L1-medium program models described above, sometimes independently but often with support from international education stakeholders such as those mentioned in Sect. 2.2 below. The high value that African nations place on their own languages and cultures, along with clear evidence that the international language-medium education system is not serving African children well, are strong motivators for the ongoing engagement that is taking place across the continent with a wide range of L1-medium programs.

However, L1-medium programs are vulnerable to a range of significant challenges. Understanding the bases and the features of these challenges is important if they are to be addressed effectively. Four types of challenges are described below, along with brief suggestions as to how they can be effectively addressed.

2.1 Challenge: Lack of Buy-in from Local Stakeholders

One of the most pervasive challenges to L1-medium program implementation is a lack of support for, and sometimes actual resistance to, such programming on the part of parents, teachers, and local education authorities. Even in communities where the L1 is used and valued, the belief that the entirety of formal education should be carried out in international languages rather than the local language can be significant.

This perspective has its basis in two related sources: the origins of schooling with the colonial powers, in which their powerful 'outside' knowledge was mediated in an 'outside' language; and the ongoing identification of modernity and economic achievement with non-local languages. The instrumental attraction of international languages is extensive and powerful; English, French and Portuguese are seen as the languages of development and socioeconomic advancement (Higgins, 2009), "a warrant for success in professional life" (Ngomo, 2011: 140) and world citizenship.

These perceptions are themselves challenged by empirical evidence to the contrary (Arcand & Grin, 2013: 262; Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016; Romaine, 2015). Ricento (2015) observes that, for African learners and their families, the notion that English fluency will lead to higher income holds true only when such fluency is combined with the skills that are attained in higher education. Since access to higher education is generally accessible only to the elite, for both economic and sociopolitical reasons, this link between international language use and socioeconomic gains does not actually benefit lower-resourced populations. Nevertheless, since colonial times non-elite African parents have been determined that their children should have the same curriculum, mediated in the same language as is provided for the children of the national and international elites (Gifford & Weiskel, 1971:664).

African languages, on the other hand, may be perceived by their own speakers as inadequate to mediate either academic endeavors (Breton, 2003: 209) or development activities (Okafor & Noah, 2014). Djité (2008: 62) observes that "lay people, as well as the so-called elite, have been so much taken in by the myths about African languages that they no longer believe their own language capable of intellectualization". The prospect of the child learner gaining a new and deeper understanding of curriculum content, and validating his or her culture and identity as a learner, does not even enter into the discussion when – as noted above – that child's ultimate economic success is perceived to be at stake.

These beliefs about the inappropriateness of using local languages in the classroom are further buttressed by a range of inaccurate myths about language and learning, such as:

- the certainty that the most effective way to build fluency in a language the learner does not speak is to "maximise the time spent using that language as the medium of instruction, without building fluency in that language first and without using the learner's first language as a resource" (Trudell et al., 2015: 142).

- the belief that knowledge related to 'developed' global contexts must be communicated in a global language, a myth that is supported to some extent by the lack of vocabulary development in local languages for the technological and development domains. Mweri (2020) notes an over-reliance on foreign languages in the development sphere, based on "the false belief that English (read foreign) language education equals development" (p. 15).
- the belief that local-language medium education is prohibitively expensive (Orwenjo, 2012: 304), based partly on the belief that multiplying language of instruction will multiply the associated costs as well. See Sect. 2.3 (below) for further discussion of this issue.

It must also be recognized that, for local education stakeholders in Africa, experience with effective education alternatives that prominently feature L1-medium learning is rare to nonexistent. These stakeholders have rarely if ever seen textbooks in their L1, or heard a teacher use that language to teach a proper lesson, or seen their child bring home an examination paper written in the language of their home. Teachers themselves may be unable to read or write fluently in the L1, without specific training in those skills. Asked to risk their children's future school success on a 'non-school' language, few local education stakeholders are ready to take that risk. It should also be noted that this resistance does not necessarily end with the first years of implementation of L1-medium reading programming; such programming runs counter to long-held beliefs about the purpose and nature of formal education, and those beliefs are not easily set aside.

However, these very features that hinder local stakeholder buy-in also point the way for dealing with this challenge. Respectful, evidence-based engagement with community stakeholders can broaden their understanding and acceptance of the use of local languages for learning. Ensuring that classroom teachers gain reading and writing skills in the local language, and subsequent demonstrations of successful L1-medium learning by their children can also have significant impact on local perspective. Ultimately, these stakeholders are seeking the most successful education experience possible for their children; they need evidence that L1-medum learning will yield that. Assisting government education bodies that are tasked with implementation of such programs, with evidence generation and advocacy activities, can be a productive and valued demonstration of collaboration.

Engagement with local education stakeholders was a central feature of an L1-medium early grade reading project carried out by Concern Worldwide and SIL Africa in Marsabit, Kenya from 2014 to 2016. Using Concern's community conversations model,[3] project staff held on-site discussions on L1-medium education with county education officials, local political leaders and other community stakeholders, with a view to building support for L1-based learning. A language mapping activity was carried out in the 32 schools of Marsabit Central zone in Marsabit county, investigating not only children's language fluencies but also the perspectives of community stakeholders about language of instruction. Based on this

[3] https://www.concernusa.org/project-profile/community-conversations/

engagement with both the local government and the local community, a Borana-language reading pilot program was implemented.

2.2 Challenge: A Non-conducive Policy Environment

Language policy environment also has substantial impact on the acceptance and success of L1-medium educational programming. Where national policy, or local appropriation of that policy, are not conducive to the use of local languages in the classroom, long-term support for L1-medium programming can be a serious challenge.

In recognition of both the linguistic diversity and the limited international-language fluency of their populations, most African states have national language policies that support the use of one or more indigenous African languages in education and governance. Typically, African languages are designated a role in the early primary grades, with the former colonial language taking a greater role in upper primary and beyond. A 2016 study of language policy in eastern and southern Africa found that 20 of 21 states had language policies in place that permitted the use of African languages in some way in the education system (Trudell, 2016: 96). Central and west African nations are also generally supportive of a similar use of indigenous languages in the classroom. The challenges in nearly every one of these African states lie not in the language policy itself, but in its alignment with other education policies and the degree to which its implementation is resourced.

National language policy is typically sited in national governance documents such as the constitution, and/or in national education policy documents. For example, Ethiopia's current core language policy is found in the 1994 Constitution, with further policy content in the National Education and Training Policy (Nakamura et al., 2020: 5). South Africa's post-apartheid language policy is outlined in its Constitution of 1996, and further specified in the 1997 language in education policy (Trudell, 2016: 64). However, in many African nations the language policy is primarily an education-related document, and is held within the Ministry of Education. Such ministerial-level policy statements tend to be more vulnerable to frequent, politically-motivated changes than are policies that are grounded in a constitution-level legal framework.[4]

A close examination of language policy formulation and change across Africa indicates that national language policy, no matter what its content, receives strong implementational support under certain conditions (Shohamy, 2006; Trudell, 2021; Trudell & Piper, 2014):

- Where the policy is seen as reflecting a radical new national direction;
- Where the policy reflects a strong stance related to national identity;

[4] For example, Ansah (2014) records nine significant language of instruction policy changes taking place in Ghana between 1951 and 2014; in 2019, the policy changed yet again.

- Where the state is strong enough to provide resourcing for the policy, and to align other policies to support it;
- Where local appropriation of the policy aligns with national policy, even where the national policy is not locally enforced.

Language policy that is not reflective of the real aspirations and identity of the nation's leaders can be vulnerable to frequent changes and inadequate implementation. In addition, where language policy does not resonate with local aspirations and beliefs about language, local support and implementation will not be automatic (Trudell et al., 2015: 139; Trudell & Piper, 2014). The evidence is that the pedagogical implications of language of instruction choices do not carry nearly the weight for stakeholders as do these larger issues.

Given the key role of language in shaping education outcomes, certain international education organizations are particularly concerned with national language policy content (Kymlicka and Grin 2003:19). Documents published and disseminated in the last decade by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) and the African Union promote the use of African languages in formal learning, though some are more specific about it than others. For example, the African Union's *Agenda 2063,* initiated in 2013, includes among its aspirations that "African languages will be the basis for administration and integration"[5]; however, the role of African languages of instruction in attaining this aspiration is not specified. At the other end of the spectrum, a joint 2010 publication by UIL and ADEA, entitled *Why and How Africa Should Invest in African Languages and Multilingual Education* (Ouane & Glanz, 2010), is both explicit and insistent on the issue.

International education donors are another source of influence on national language policy. In the last decade, four of the largest donors to education in African nations have expressed significant support for the use of African languages of instruction in primary classrooms.

- USAID's education policy statement of November 2018[6] argues that the prevalent language mismatch between learning materials, teachers and pupils is a significant educational obstacle. In an effort to help overcome it, the 2019–2020 US Government report to the US Congress on international basic education[7] highlights the provision of
- more than 34.7 million primary and secondary students in 53 countries with opportunities to learn literacy, numeracy, and other basic skills, in formal and non-formal settings, *including in local languages* (p. 4, author's emphasis).

[5] https://nepad.org/agenda-2063/aspirations/336

[6] https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/2018_Education_Policy_FINAL_WEB.pdf

[7] https://www.edulinks.org/sites/default/files/media/file/USG%20International%20Basic%20ED%20Strategy%20FY19%20Report%20to%20Congress%20FINAL.pdf

- The World Bank's publication on effective language of instruction policies (World Bank, 2021) is its clearest statement in favor of the use of local languages for learning, and builds on earlier reports on inclusion A (World Bank, 2019a: 29–34) and poverty reduction (World Bank, 2019b: 27).
- A 2018 education policy statement by the UK Government's Department for International Development (DfID)[8] (now the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO), advocates "developing the teaching workforce so that it reflects the diverse cultural and linguistic groups present in a country, enabling children to be taught in a familiar language" (p. 17).
- The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) cites the need for language-inclusive education policy and programming, as part of its overall advocacy for the inclusion of children who are disadvantaged in current education systems (Global Partnership for Education, 2019: 17). In 2021, the GPE helped to fund the *Read@Home* program, focusing on the development of easy-reading books in local languages of several African countries, for distribution to homes affected by the COVID-19-induced education crisis.[9]

However, it should be noted that this pro-local language messaging from well-resourced donors may or may not exert significant influence on national decisions regarding language of instruction. Issues of identity, diversity, inclusion and national aspiration all make the formulation and implementation of national language in education policy highly complex.

One example of the complex relationship between language of instruction projects and national interests is Rwanda. As noted in Table 2 above, an estimated 12% of Rwandans speak English; in contrast, Kinyarwanda is spoken by 95% of the nation's population.[10] For this reason, the USAID-funded early grade reading project *Literacy, Learning and Language [L3] Initiative,*[11] taking place between 2012 and 2017, prominently featured and supported the use of Kinyarwanda as a medium of reading instruction – in alignment with the national language policy at the time. The USAID-funded *Soma Umenye* project, in operation from 2016 to 2021, has aimed at increasing children's reading skills in Kinyarwanda as well.[12] The L3 program resulted in good learning gains in mathematics and reading[13]; early results from *Soma Umenye* showed a statistically significant gains in reading skills.[14] However, despite these learning gains, and notwithstanding extensive materials development, training and classroom implementation, in 2019 the Rwandan

[8] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/685536/DFID-Education-Policy-2018a.pdf

[9] Read@Home (worldbank.org).

[10] https://www.ethnologue.com/country/RW/languages

[11] https://www.edc.org/literacy-language-and-learning-l3-initiative

[12] https://chemonics.com/projects/paving-path-literacy-rwanda/

[13] L3 Education | Rwanda | U.S. Agency for International Development (usaid.gov)Executive Summary.pdf (edc.org).

[14] PA00T13Z.pdf (usaid.gov).

government moved to make English the sole language of instruction from the early grades.[15] Interestingly, USAID has maintained overt promotion of Kinyarwanda-medium learning in the early grades[16]; whether this is likely to effect policy change is unclear.

A contrasting example is provided by Uganda, where a bilaterally-funded early grade reading program has strengthened the government's ability to implement its language of instruction policy. The USAID-funded *School Health and Reading Program* (SHRP), carried out from 2012 to 2017, focused on early-grade reading instruction programming in 12 Ugandan languages as chosen by the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). This program supported the official thematic curriculum that has been in place since 2007, and which calls for L1-medium instruction through P3 as well as the inclusion of literacy as a curriculum subject. Evaluation of the program indicated that SHRP had a statistically significant positive impact on literacy achievement in nine of the 12 languages (Brunette et al., 2019). Three years after the formal end of SHRP, GPE-funded literacy support, the USAID LARA program, and smaller education projects all continued to support the MoES's thematic curriculum's focus on Ugandan languages with materials and programming.

Thus, the indications are that donors' language of instruction interests may or may not have a long-term influence on national language policy choices. It could be argued that where donor interests align with one or more of the four national policy conditions noted above, they are more likely to have long-term impact on language policy and practice. Where development institutions' early-grade reading interventions in local languages do not get the real language-based concerns of national education policymakers, the proposed learning outcomes of such interventions may not be enough to drive sustained change.

Advocacy engagement at the policy level thus must be carefully strategized. It needs to begin with an understanding of the underlying issues of identity and aspirations, along with a clear perspective on how local language-medium learning can support them. Opportunities for policy dialogue at both national and local levels can be very useful, as can exposure to policy solutions that have been effective elsewhere in the world.

2.3 *Challenge: Alignment and Involvement of Education Systems*

Language in education policies and practices are embedded in, and supported by, a range of formal education structures and systems. Where changes in language of instruction practice are implemented, the potential for conflict with existing 'ways

[15] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/01/24/third-time-11-years-rwanda-changed-language-used-primary-schools/; In Rwanda, Language Change in Schools Leaves Students and Teachers Struggling (worldpoliticsreview.com).

[16] Education | Rwanda | U.S. Agency for International Development (usaid.gov).

of doing things' is very real. This lack of alignment can pose a significant threat to successful implementation of the desired language practices in the classrooms.

Systems with impact on the L1-medium classroom itself include those related to teachers, curriculum and teaching and learning materials (TLMs). These systems are generally overseen centrally in a national Ministry of Education.

The systems and structures that provide teacher provision and support are generally substantial. Units linked to the Ministry of Education are responsible for teacher certification, capacity-building, allocation, supervision, salaries and other aspects of teacher functioning. These will all be highly relevant to any attempts to sustainably provide competent L1-speaking teachers to a project, especially where teacher allocation policies do not support matching teachers to school assignments based on teachers' language fluency. Teacher training institutions are also clearly relevant to appropriate capacity-building for teaching new subjects in the new language of instruction. Some of the greatest challenges to successful L1-medium programming have to do with the language attitudes and teacher language practices that are conveyed in these contexts. In addition, the relative independence of these teacher-support institutions from other government education units can make them exceptionally challenging to bring on board with new L1-medium program initiatives.

Where the curriculum is concerned, the systems that oversee curriculum content (including that related to language) and examinations have a substantial influence on language attitudes and language of instruction practices. One particular challenge to L1-medium instruction is the widespread practice of using the official language for subject examinations, regardless of the language in which the subject is taught. This one policy choice is the source of extreme reluctance on the part of teachers and learners to use any other language as the medium of instruction, given the weight that examination results carry at the individual and school level.

TLMs are under the control of the curriculum-setting system as well. Its approval of materials for classroom use is required, based on national standards related to the format and content of pedagogical materials. Any materials to be used in L1-medium classroom teaching must conform to these standards as well, although sometimes 'pilot' or experimental L1-medium programs may be permitted to use non-approved TLMs.

A higher-level system that strongly influences L1-medium education programming is government education financing. Probably the single most frequent objection made to MTB-MLE at the policy level is its supposedly 'prohibitive' cost (Orwenjo, 2012: 304); indeed, this perception can shut down even the discussion of including multiple local languages in a national education system. The 'common-sense' belief is that multiplying languages in the curriculum will mean multiplying the associated costs as well. This concern has been demonstrated to be an overstatement of the actual facts. Kymlicka and Grin (2003: 18) calculate that moving from a monolingual to a bilingual education system adds less than 5% to the national education budget. Heugh (2011) estimates a less than 10% budget increase for multilingual education, and demonstrates that the higher repetition and drop-out rates that characterize monolingual classroom instruction make such education *more* expensive than bilingual education. Thus, while the costs of learning materials

production may indeed increase with more languages, given the realities of smaller print runs, research comparing the long-term, overall costs of these language of instruction options suggests a different picture.

It is also important to consider that, beyond the number of languages being proposed, L1-medium program interventions nearly always assume investment in a generally higher quality of education programming: an adequate number and quality of teaching and learning materials, teachers who are appropriately trained and supported, and a classroom context that is conducive to learning. Good-quality education, characterized by these features, inevitably requires more investment than does poor-quality education. Language choice is itself a feature of educational quality, but is by no means the single feature that increases program costs.

These points of potential system non-alignment may be addressed by (1) understanding the systems and how they work, (2) giving real effort to advocacy engagement with those who control the systems, and (3) engaging openly and appreciatively in problem-solving with this group. System changes typically require high-level involvement by the Ministry of Education and its associated institutions, so it is important to provide these decision-makers with the best evidence available on why changes are needed, and support them to consider how best to implement such changes in their particular country and language context.

The importance of ensuring systems alignment is evidenced by the fact that large, donor-funded early grade reading interventions in the last decade have dedicated significant effort and resourcing towards exactly this outcome. One recent example is the *USAID Ghana Partnership for Education: Learning* activity, implemented by a consortium led by FHI360. A multi-language early grade reading program was the centerpiece of this project; it took place from 2014 to 2019, targeting learners speaking 11 Ghanaian languages in 100 (out of 216 total) districts of the country. The scale of this program required substantial systems alignment and involvement for its success. To that end, the *Learning* activity prioritized extensive cooperation with Ministry of Education/Ghana Education Service (GES) staff at national, regional and district levels. *Learning* staff were co-located in the regional education offices of the GES in all 10 regions of the country, enhancing the potential for collaboration and alignment between project and existing education support systems as they implemented the 11-language program across the country.[17]

2.4 Challenge: A Language-Diverse Environment

With few exceptions, the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa are linguistically very rich. Table 5 below provides language counts for a few sample countries (Eberhard et al., 2020). The languages in the counts given below are actively spoken by ethnic

[17] https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/resource-ghana-learning-brochure.pdf

Table 5 Living, indigenous language counts in a sample of African countries (*Ethnologue 2020*)[a]

Country	Niger	Tanzania	Nigeria	Kenya	Cameroon	Mali	Senegal	Ethiopia	Botswana
# Living indigenous languages	19	117	508	60	270	63	31	86	26

[a]An adapted version of this table appears in Ralaingita et al. (2021)

communities indigenous to their respective countries. A number of these languages lack a stable writing system, and are used primarily orally; however, many hundreds of Africa's languages are written, even if they are not used in the formal education system. In such language-rich environments, multilingualism in neighboring languages and languages of wider communication is often high; this multilingualism does not, however, imply fluency in any international language.

The potential challenges to L1-medium education programming in such linguistically rich environments are both linguistic (related to the languages themselves) and sociolinguistic (related to stakeholders' attitudes and perspectives on the languages).

The linguistic challenges have primarily to do with (1) the geographical and demographic spread of the languages in focus, and (2) whether established orthographies (writing systems) and pedagogical materials exist for those languages. The processes for addressing these questions are well established; they include language mapping, community-based orthography review, language analysis for reading instruction and materials development activities.

However, the more difficult challenges that the language-diverse African environment poses for L1-medium education programming stem not from the number and variety of languages spoken, but, rather from the level of readiness to consider the possibilities that exist for their use in education and society. This lack of readiness is based partly on a poor understanding of the language ecology in the region or communities in focus, but also on a view of educational programming that is biased in the direction of recognizing just one language per nation.

One particular problem is the perception that the number of recognized languages in a country correlates with the degree of political fragmentation and disunity present in the country. The 'one language, one nation' argument assumes, incorrectly, that suppressing all but one language somehow draws a population together and promotes national unity (Bamgbose, 1991). The case of Rwanda's political upheaval, in which two ethnic communities which spoke the same language experienced violent conflict between 1959 and 1994 (Prunier, 1995), is one example of the inaccuracy of this argument.

Another perspective that hinders effective classroom language practices is the notion that, with so many languages in the mix, an international language of instruction is the 'neutral choice' that provides the same advantage (or disadvantage) to all learners (Opoku-Amankwa & Aba Brew-Hammond, 2011). In fact, there are no such 'neutral' languages of instruction; whichever language is chosen, those who are more fluent in it will have a learning advantage. In the case of international

languages, those Africans who speak them also tend to be wealthier and more socially privileged; choosing these languages of instruction serves to widen the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' (Trudell, 2010: 344).

One common approach that African states take to the language diversity and learning dilemma has been the designation of a limited number of African languages as permissible for early-primary education, along with the international language of choice. This approach offers the possibility of L1- or L2-medium learning for those who speak the designated languages; when the population of L1 or L2 speakers is large, this can make a significant difference to education access. In addition, children who speak languages that are in the same language family as the designated language of instruction find it easier to manage than an international language.

Examples of this limited-language of instruction policy approach include Malawi's policy of Chichewa and English as languages of education, Nigeria's policy (until 2013; see Trudell, 2018) of giving special emphasis to Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as regional languages of instruction, and Mali's policy of using Bamanankan, Songhay, Fulfulde, Senoufo/Minyanka and Dogon as languages of instruction (along with Arabic and French) in primary schools (Eberhard et al., 2020b). In other countries, prioritization of particular languages of instruction over others is practiced without explicit policies that support that practice, such as Kiswahili in Kenya, Mooré in Burkina Faso, and Hausa, Zarma and Tamacheq in Niger (Eberhard et al., 2020c). As of 2017, Niger's multilingual education initiative was using three more of the nation's ten official languages – Gourmanchéma, Boudouma (also called Yedina) and Dazaga (also called Tubu), – along with French.[18]

It must be said that this promotion of a limited number of languages rarely satisfies the entire citizenry of the country; indeed, the rich linguistic diversity across Africa virtually guarantees that any choice of African languages of instruction will inevitably sideline many other languages. Only policies such as that of South Africa, which leave the language choice up to the community (Trudell, 2016: 64), are able to evade this accusation to some extent; and even in the South African case, the policy names 11 languages from which the communities can choose out of 20 indigenous South African languages and 10 non-indigenous languages (Eberhard et al., 2020a).

It is thus not uncommon for community members, offered education programming for their children in an African language that is not their own, to reject it in favor of international language-medium alternatives. Where they might be ready to consider learning opportunities for their children in their own language, asking those children to learn another African language of no more prestige than their home language is seen as culturally insulting and educationally pointless. This truly is a challenge, given the logistical impossibility of offering instruction in every language spoken on the continent. Examples of this dilemma include ongoing resistance to the use of Swahili as medium of instruction in Luo-speaking Nyanza

[18] https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/piloting-mother-tongue-curriculum-improve-literacy-niger

Province, Kenya[19]; the extensive language mismatch that exists between designated Ghanaian languages of instruction and the language fluencies of the pupils, in schools in some regions of Ghana (USAID Partnership for Education: Learning, 2018: 21); and the reluctance of South African parents to have their children learn in another South African language than their home language (Trudell, 2016: 64–65.)

These thorny sociolinguistic challenges are best met with a range of data-gathering activities on the languages in question, and engagement with the stakeholder communities regarding what practical solutions might be possible. Where such discussions are taking place on a provisional or nation level, finding 'wins' in certain communities and moving ahead there is also a good strategy. Where multilingualism extends into a community and its school system, strategies for dealing with multiple languages in the formal learning context have also been developed and can be brought to bear (see Trudell & Young, 2016).

3 Where Local Language-Medium Learning Is Not an Option

It is rare in African education contexts to encounter a complete lack of opportunity for implementing local language-medium learning programs. Where this does happen, it is generally related to a prohibitive national policy. As long as such programs are not actually against the law, support for, and implementation of, local-language learning programs can and does take place at many levels, carried out by many different actors. In the cases where national policy completely rules out the inclusion of local language-medium learning in the formal education system, however, it is important to understand the reasons for this policy choice.

As noted above, national language policy that reflects a strong stance related to national identity, or expresses a new political direction, tends not to be open to modification. Where that stance or direction involves limiting language of instruction choices, options for change are severely constrained. Some African examples include:

- *Tanzania.* With the establishment of the political philosophy of *Ujamaa* in the early 1960s, Nyerere's government chose to use only one African language – Kiswahili – to convey this new political direction. It is said that Nyerere recognized and sympathized with the large number of language communities in the country, but he intentionally sacrificed their formal recognition in the interests of consolidating and spreading his vision for Tanzania as a nation. This approach was so powerful that it has only been in recent years that conversation about indigenous Tanzanian languages has been perceived as allowable. In fact, Kiswahili's primary competitor for linguistic priority in Tanzania today is English.

[19] Author's personal experience.

- *Rwanda*. As noted above, in 2019 the government ofEducation | Rwanda | U.S. Agency for International Development (usaid.gov) declared English as the sole language of instruction in Rwandan primary schools. This decision was the latest in a 20 plus-year trend for replacing French – and eventually Kinyarwanda as well – with English as the language of formal education. The lengthy and deep political factors involved in this language policy move contribute to its current non-negotiability.
- *Côte d'Ivoire*. Throughout its history, Côte d'Ivoire has been known as the 'most French' of francophone African nations. The use of French as the sole language of formal education has been the law since 1944, and was unchanged upon the country gaining independence from France in 1958. Although a national commission created in 1972 aimed to integrate Ivorian languages into the education system, it was sidelined by the Ivorian government and its primary aid donors (Djité, 2007: 168). Over the years, the strategic location of the country in West Africa, and its leaders' close relationships with the French government, has cemented its 'francophone' identity and language policy.

What these three examples have in common is the embedding of language of instruction policy in significant political intention that has little to do with pedagogical considerations per se. This unwillingness to take pedagogical realities into account can take a severe toll on the quality of learning experienced by the pupils in such systems.

It important to understand, however, that the current language policies in most African states have not developed in this way. More often, language policy reflects a long and complex relationship between the national language ecology and formal learning systems; it is often dependent on individual ministerial inclination, or the responses of the political party in power to social, cultural and economic influences. This is why language policy is so often vulnerable to change; and it is why a *lack* policy support for the implementation of local language-medium learning can be equally vulnerable to the next round of ministerial appointments or the next elected government.

In contexts such as this, advocacy measures such as research evidence, pilot programming and community engagement can be very important. Where programming is intended to provide convincing evidence of the positive outcomes of local-language medium learning, it should:

- be based on solid attention to both the international language AND the local language as languages of oral and written fluency;
- bear in mind the long-term educational goal of success in secondary and higher education, which requires academic competency in the non-local (usually international) language of instruction;
- attend to the other long-term valued outcomes of L1-medium learning such as parent and community engagement in children's learning, acquisition of strong literacy skills, and decreased school attrition.

The importance of such advocacy on behalf of L1-medium policy in African nations is highlighted by the damage often done by an L2 immersion approach to the

vitality of the pupils' L1, and their own sense of personal and community value, when its potential as a language of formal learning is denied. Immersion bilingual education programs have long been in operation in Canada, with French-medium instruction for L1 English speakers (Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Swain & Johnson, 1997); however, this particular single-language immersion approach does not put the political, educational, economic or social status of either language in danger. The same cannot be said of marginalized African languages, whose communities of speakers struggle with a limited tradition of writing and precarious perceived national value. And, while immersion (or, as critics term it, "submersion"; see Nakamura et al. 2020:20) describes the *de facto* classroom situation in the great majority of African states, intentional funded programmatic support for such an approach seems unhelpful.

Where the education policy does not permit use of local languages in the formal classroom, other programmatic measures can be taken to support children's learning in a language that they speak. One effective strategy is a programmatic focus on nonformal, community-oriented reading and learning activities. Out-of-school programming such as Save the Children's Literacy Boost[20] focuses on reading camps and other community-based reading activities. When storybooks and other reading materials are produced in the local language, using community-based literature development strategies, the nonformal reading camp environment can be an effective way to build children's skills of reading comprehension (Trudell & Ndunde, 2015). Other strategies include the establishment of community libraries and study centers, and provision of a teacher or mentor who speaks the local language and can help children with their school assignments.

Where policy change is out of the question, support for L2 learning in the classroom can help children to face the language barrier. L2-medium classrooms in Africa often assume pupil fluency in the L2, which creates substantial obstacles to students' learning of both content and the L2. Support for L2-medium learning could include not only explicit instruction in the L2 as a second or foreign language, but also building teachers' ability to use the L1 in a structured way to scaffold L2 curriculum content. It must be said, however, that explicit L2 support of this kind is uncommon in African classrooms. More informal code-switching in the classroom is far more common, but it is generally regarded as poor teaching practice (see for example Trudell, 2018: 25).

4 Conclusion and Thoughts on Further Research

Though a great deal of research has been carried out on the role of language in learning and the impact of using local languages of instruction in the formal education system, much still remains to be studied in the field. Research in this field is

[20] https://www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/global-programs/education/literacy-boost

important both for its role in problem-solving and for the provision of evidence that supports advocacy endeavors. Some useful research directions that remain include:

- A comparative study of the outcomes of early-exit L1-medium instructional programming in two or more African contexts, focusing on non-academic outcomes as well as the impact on learning outcomes through the upper primary grades. Evidence exists that use of the L1 in the early grades, and particularly teaching pupils to read with understanding, has impact on pupil attendance, dropout rates, community involvement in the school, and the overall experience of the child in school. A rigorous examination of these and other non-academic outcomes, as well as any extended academic impact, would be a meaningful addition to our understanding of how MTB-MLE works and what it can do.
- A comprehensive study of code-switching in the primary classroom in Africa. Code-switching is a common practice in African classrooms, but the evidence is mixed as to whether it is beneficial to children's learning or not (e.g. Trudell, 2018). The terminology related to this phenomenon (e.g. translanguaging, code-mixing) is similarly mixed in use and definition. Clarifying the nature and impact of code-switching in the classroom is important for understanding the extent to which it should be encouraged or discouraged.
- A study of the linguistic and social features that affect how broadly a given language of instruction will be acceptable and useful in multilingual African community contexts. Given the impossibility of developing every African language for use as a medium of instruction, such a study would help enhance the success of the African-language educational programming that is being developed.
- A year-by-year longitudinal comparison of the impact of the L1 across the curriculum model and that of L1 as reading subject only. Most bilingual education programs in Africa use L1 as the medium of instruction only for teaching reading in the early grades, even though many more benefits of L1-medium learning accrue when a program uses the L1 across the curriculum. What are the relative benefits of each approach from where learning outcomes, language transition and program cost are concerned?
- A study of the most effective methods for supporting children through the language transition period. Whether an early-exit or late-exit approach is chosen, there is limited empirical research regarding how to effectively help children through the language transition (Piper & Miksic, 2011). In particular, understanding how to most effectively help teachers manage the early-exit transition year of Grade 3 or 4 successfully is essential.
- Rigorous cost analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis of the language options described in this chapter. Few large-scale cost analyses have been carried out that investigate the policy options that we describe here; filling this research gap is critical.
- Studies of the ability of African countries to implement various language policy options at scale. Small scale studies exist on this topic, but few of the large scale implementation interventions have included rigorous analysis of whether and how the language options work at scale within complex government systems,

especially where various levels of language diversity are concerned. Assessment of the PRIMR early grade reading program, as it has operated within Kenya's complex language ecology (Piper et al., 2016, 2018) demonstrates the need for such studies elsewhere as well.

- Research on specific sociolinguistic contexts that are currently of particular interest, such as language of instruction choices for refugee learners, language choice and overage learners, and language choices for early childhood care and education.

Despite the complexity of local language-medium education programming, the long history of bilingual and multilingual learning programs in Africa indicates that they can have significant impact on learning outcomes. Many resources are available to support such programming, the products of years of experience in implementing local language-medium learning programs in Africa. MTB-MLE is not a short-term program solution to the challenges of Africa's formal education systems; but, when implemented with care, taking into account the complexities of large and national scale and in collaboration with local and national stakeholders, it can contribute substantially to the long-term effectiveness of primary and secondary education on the continent.

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