

## LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION IN GHANA: THE DEBATE.

**EKUA TEKYIWA AMUA-SEKYI**

*Department of Arts & Social Sciences Education  
University of Cape Coast  
Cape Coast.  
Ghana.*

[nanaekua\\_2000@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nanaekua_2000@yahoo.co.uk)

### **Abstract**

*Recent anxiety over low performance in English of students and graduates of the country's educational institutions expressed by the populace and the print and electronic media led to a cabinet directive that the mother tongue policy medium in the first three years of primary education should give way to a straight-for-English medium policy of instruction and communication at all levels of education in Ghana. This cabinet directive sparked off a language policy debate.*

*This paper examines issues surrounding the use of the English language as a medium of instruction in education in Ghana and the debate over change in education language policy. In considering, particularly, the viability of the mother tongue medium in primary education, a survey of 404 teachers in basic schools in 6 out of the 10 regions of Ghana was conducted to find out about their perceived classroom communication practice and language preference. Responses from teachers sampled indicate that a minority of teachers use the mother tongue exclusively during the teaching/learning process; bilingual code-switching as a communication strategy was commonly used; but the majority of teachers use the English language though more than half of the teachers sampled did not consider themselves proficient in the English language. It is argued that descriptions of classroom communication practice are necessary to inform effective education language planning. The discussion links up with the communicative needs of teachers and learners and implications for teacher training and education.*

### **Introduction**

Ghana, like other African countries, believes in education through the language of the ex-colonial master, the English

language. The important place of mother tongue medium in the early years of primary education in expanding the child's background of ideas and power of expression, as well as in helping in the acquisition of a second language, is recognised as a matter not merely of educational theory and practice, but one of general policy. When, however, research reports such as the Criterion Referenced Tests and Performance Tests, (amid anxiety expressed by the populace and press), indicated that an alarming proportion of students in public/state schools could not read below the proficiency level, many people, including the Minister of Education at the time, partly blamed the mass failure on the policy of using the mother tongue medium in the first three years of primary schooling. Consequently, a cabinet decision in 2002 led to a policy directive that the local mother tongues which were hitherto the medium of instruction and communication in schools from primary 1 to 3 should give way to a straight-for-English language policy at the primary level. The English language is to be used as the medium of instruction and communication at all levels of the education system to facilitate teaching and learning of the language.

The issue of medium of instruction at the lower primary levels has, as a result of the policy directive, been the subject of intense public debate in recent times. In considering the various views expressed, this writer examines language choice and the basis for educational language policy making. Insights offered by opinions of teachers whose views on language in education have been sought and the implications for future policy directions are considered.

### **Language Policy and Practice in Ghana**

From a historical perspective, language policies in Ghana have been varied depending on what period, who was initiating the policy and with what objective. The period of the castle schools (1629-1920) saw the use of Portuguese, Dutch, Danish and English as media of instruction whenever and wherever we had the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Danes and the English. The Europeans thought there was no need to develop or use the mother tongue of the natives because they would not have any significant impact on their trading activities. The language situation, however, changed with the coming of the Christian missions whose primary objective was to establish a church very close to the culture of the people. Great emphasis was placed on the use of the mother tongue (Mc William & Kwamena-Poh, 1975). The Wesleyan missionaries, who settled in Fanteland, made quite good progress in the introduction of a western type of education. Their initial emphasis was on English as a medium of instruction and communication. After almost fifty years, an

attempt was made to promote literature in the Fante language. The Basel mission and the Bremen mission, on the other hand, used the Twi and Ewe languages as the media of instruction respectively.

From 1919-1972 a systematic pattern began to emerge with regard to both education and language. It was the first time that the colonial government legislated on the status of Ghanaian languages (Gbedemah, 1975: 43). Gordon Guggisberg, British Governor of the then Gold Coast (Ghana), maintained that school education should not denationalise the recipients. There should be, according to him, a good marriage between the national culture and the best attributes of modern civilization. The twelfth of the 'sixteen principles' he formulated for education in Ghana states that 'whilst an English education must be given, it must be based solidly on the vernacular/mother tongue' (McWilliams & Kwamena-Poh, 1975: 58). The 1925 Education Ordinance made the use of the Ghanaian language medium

compulsory at the lower primary level, primary one to primary three (P1-P3). At the upper primary level, primary four to primary six (P4-P6), the Ghanaian language was to be replaced by English, which was hitherto to be studied as a school subject. The Ghanaian language was then to be studied as a subject in the curriculum.

There have been variations to this language policy from 1955 to date. From 1955-1966, a straight-for-English language policy was pursued when sections of educated Ghanaians thought Guggisberg's policy was a design by the British to give an inferior education to the native populace. From 1966-1972, the Ghanaian language was used as the medium of instruction for at least the first year of school. However, in many localities, the mother tongue of the area was used throughout the ten-year elementary course. The period 1972-1981 did not see much change in educational language policy, though there were several changes of government. The problem was, the language policy was not implemented and teachers decided on what language to use as medium depending on their peculiar circumstances. The New structure and content of Education in Ghana, a report of the committee appointed by the National Redemption Council (NRC) government in 1974, to review the structure and content of education in Ghana, proposed, among other things, that the use of the Ghanaian language should be encouraged from primary one to the University level. The mother tongue should be the medium of instruction from P1-P3 and as a school subject in the remaining levels.

Nearly all the past major review committees on education in Ghana have presented positive recommendations on the mother tongues and their role in education at the primary and secondary levels. All the committees agreed that, at least, during the first 3 years of primary school education, the mother tongue should be used as a medium of instruction and should be taught as a subject (Boadi, 1994). From 1981 to date, the policy on language use, in general, and in education, in particular, has not altered on paper. This time, a uniform syllabus has been prepared for English and the Ghanaian languages for use in the primary, junior and senior secondary schools. However, the practice is that primary schools decide on what language they would use as a medium. As a school subject, the Ghanaian languages are not taught seriously because of unavailability of trained teachers to handle these languages. The need to educate the child in the first three years of schooling through the mother tongue is generally recognised by educationists. In practice, however, the use of English as a medium of communication and instruction right through primary education is preferred in most circles. This is almost a traditional African attitude as the great objective of parents in sending their children to school is for them to acquire proficiency in the English language.

### **Language Teaching in Some African Countries.**

Since Kenya's independence, there has been a growing trend toward the use of English as a medium of instruction. According to Gachukia (1970), sixty percent of primary schools in Kenya including all the schools in urban areas use English as a medium of instruction from primary one. The Ministry of Education and individual educationists including supervisors, headmasters and teachers may see the importance of teaching the mother tongues. What matters most to the average parent, the teacher and the child himself is that he should pass the examination at the end of his primary education. Lack of local language newspapers, periodicals and literature is a factor which has hindered any enthusiasm or motivation that could have encouraged the teaching of the mother tongues.

In Tanzania, the history of Kiswahili as a medium of instruction goes back to the German colonial period when it was used in elementary schools. It is spoken by over 95% of Tanzanians. Kiswahili is a prominent language in the classrooms of primary schools, but it is not given room to flourish above the primary level, observes Mlacha, (1996). It is one thing to have and use a language and it is yet another to be able to use it for educational

purposes. The development of Kiswahili has been retarded by the general attitude of a minority group of those who do not see the importance of the indigenous language in education.

An attempt in Sierra Leone to introduce the country's four major languages, Mende, Theme, Krio and Limba into schools, according to Bockarie (1996), collapsed because of inadequate support in the form of learning materials, improper supervision, and inappropriately trained personnel. He notes that a new Education Policy for Sierra Leone launched in 1995 and a draft National Education Master Plan for 1995 to 2005 now exists. With the new language policy, the four major languages in the country have been declared the country's official community languages and shall be languages of instruction from primary 1 to 3 in the districts where they prevail. Primary 3 shall be the transition class where English will be used as the language of instruction through to tertiary level.

Fafunwa (1975) notes that in Nigeria the problem of bilingualism, especially at the primary level of children's education, is perhaps the most baffling one to the Nigerian curriculum planners, as well as teachers. In an entirely Yoruba, Hausa, or Igbo speaking areas, he states, children begin their education with the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the first two or three years. The English language becomes the medium in the third or fourth year. However, those who matter in the child's education, that is, parents, teachers and others, complain that proficiency in English, as well as the mother tongue, is lacking among the products of primary schools.

### **Conflict in the Choice of Medium of Instruction.**

The conflict which plagues the choice of language of instruction in African primary schools, according to Tiffen (1995), concerns the aim of these schools. Whether they are to provide a good general education or they are seen as preparatory schools for a minority who go on to secondary and tertiary education (p. 319). In either case, mastery of the English language is of prime importance. The difficulties in the use of either the English language or the mother tongue medium have led to a compromise policy. Children start their education in the mother tongue, learning English as a subject, and at some stage within the primary school course the English language takes over as the medium of instruction. This, however, is not the case in some African countries. According to Tiffen (1995) a few countries, notably Kenya and Zambia, are in favour of the English medium from the start because of the belief that only a thorough

understanding of English will enable children to acquire the knowledge needed for the modern world.

### **The Language Debate**

In Ghana, those who favour the use of the English language right from the beginning of primary education lauded the straight-for-English policy medium as a bold and necessary decision. To them, the problem with the English language is the cause of falling standards in education. Teachers on a three-day workshop on quality improvement in primary schools held at Akim Oda identified why the majority of pupils in the Akim-Manso circuit in the Birim South District presented blank answer booklets during their Basic Education Certificate Examination (B.E.C.E), a qualification examination for selection into senior secondary schools. The problem was their inability to understand and express themselves in the English language. Participants at the workshop were quick to compare the use of English language from primary level one in private schools to public schools where the use of English language commenced from primary level four. In support of the policy directive, numerous comparisons have been made between the academic performance of pupils in private schools or "well endowed schools" and those in state/public schools or "the less endowed schools". Osei (2002) observes that there is a primary school-university continuum and the type of seed sown determines the future. According to Osei, it is very crucial that we define the language the child will use in his later life for official, business, scientific and other formal purposes, build his linguistic competence in that language very early in his life, and then teach him concepts he will use for those purposes in that language.

The Ghana English Studies Association (GESA), an association actively researching and writing on English language and literature in Ghana, was, however, dismayed at the cabinet decision. In a press release dated 20/05/02, it argued that "the policy of introducing literacy through the mother tongue is not the source of the national problem with English". It

maintained that there is no evidence that children who start formal education without a spoken knowledge of the English language are helped by being taught only in English. To this group, maintaining the use of native languages as the linguistic medium from primary 1 to 3 permits social adaptability, adds to the psychological security of the child and promotes linguistic and, perhaps, cognitive sensitivity. In another statement issued at a press conference on 28/05/02, a group of language experts and educators in the University of Ghana, Legon, registered their protest against the cabinet directive and called on the Minister of

Education and government to review the decision. This is because "the new policy does not take into account the situation of the majority of Ghanaian children". Noting that most Ghanaian children enter school knowing their mother tongue, the use of English in the initial attempt to impart knowledge to them is to trample on their rights to be taught in the language they understand best (UNESCO, 1973). The group contended that for the vast majority of children of school going age, especially those from the semi-urban and rural areas, native Ghanaian languages constitute the link between home and school, and between the world of learning and the child's mind. Eliminating the use of Ghanaian languages as the media of instruction and communication in the first three years of formal education is not the best option. The group of experts and educators, however, did not desire to stand in the way of government. Their task was, and is, to point out the weaknesses and strengths in the policy (Owusu-Ansah, 2002).

The "hypocrisy" in the position of these critics of the straight-for-English policy, many of whom speak English with their children at home and have them attend "well endowed schools" is a point of reference in the debate. These educationists, professors, doctors, lawyers and the elite all have their children in the best schools in the country where learning of the English language starts in the kindergarten school. Their attention is drawn to the fact that the English language has come to stay and we either embrace it or leave it. *The Statesman* in its editorial of 23/07/02 notes that once the English language remains the lingua franca, we need to ensure that our pupils and students are able to speak and write it well. That is the only way to ensure the proper development of our future leaders. It further points out that these discerning views are expressed amidst processes such as globalisation, universalisation, and falling standards within multi-ethnic communities.

The diversity of stance on the policy directive demonstrates democracy at work. The debate, though, is not on education through the medium of English. It is rather a damning indictment of the mother-tongue medium of instruction and communication at the lower primary level of education for failing to lay the proper linguistic foundation necessary for sound academic work. While there is consensus on the considerable personal and social value in the early use of English as a medium of instruction, the dissension is on how to interpret and realize those values.

Nationalistic as the case for the mother tongue medium may seem, it is evident that its use as a medium, in the early years of schooling, results in improved and faster acquisition of knowledge by children if handled effectively. According to Cummins (1981), the use of the mother tongue medium helps with the acquisition of a second language because skills and knowledge gained in the mother tongue are transferred without effort to the learning of other languages. However, in multilingual situations with no clear common mother tongue, implementation of a mother tongue policy becomes difficult. Bagunywa (1970) identifies certain criteria upon which an objective decision on the choice of a mother tongue medium could be taken. Among these will be:

The existence of a substantial percentage of the national population who speak or understand the mother tongue(s) considered

The existence of written literature to make formal education viable

Availability of fairly wide circulation of newspapers in the mother tongue(s)

A standard orthography, and a relatively easy phonological transcription system of the language(s)

Availability of trained teachers and fairly widespread informal opportunities for speaking the language(s) (p.27).

Where there is lack of trained teachers in the mother tongue(s), textbooks and teaching/learning resources, the mother tongue medium becomes unviable.

Constraints to implementation of the mother tongue medium leave the English language as an available option. However, the English medium option is not without its own problems. The success or failure of the English medium, just as the mother tongue medium, hinges on the quality of teachers being produced by the teacher training colleges and availability of teaching/learning resources. The spoken language plays a central role in teaching (Goddard, 1974) and the language teacher has to be proficient to enable him/her to engage children in the communicative use of language that characterises exploratory talk which is central to learning. Availability of trained and proficient language teachers, textbooks and teaching/learning resources is essential.

#### **Issues emanating from the language debate**

Language choice, invariably, is often pragmatic, resulting in the desire for an improved standard of living, an increased social mobility and other practical considerations (Dorian, 1998:2). The



real planners are not linguists working as language planners, but politicians whose policies are usually dependent on certain ideologies, with the language planning itself secondary to other more basic socio-economic, political and social forces. Language choice, according to Hale (1998) & Fishman (1991), reflects decisions that supersede other fulfilling social activities. Language planning has been dominated, inevitably, by an instrumental goal of social and political unification. The creation of national unity has been a political imperative for post-colonial societies in Africa and the English language is the only language with the potential to transcend the ethnic (Gupta (2001). Fear of the divisive potential of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity has been an implicit but dominant theme of language planning in Ghana.

The nature of bilingual education reflects the kind of nation people want to see. When a speech community must learn another language in order to survive, this places those individuals at a disadvantage. The prestige of the native languages, social class, speaker attitude are all factors which are affected by the subordinate relationship between the native languages and the second language (Crawford, 1996). The status of languages and people's attitudes to their learning and use form a major part of the consideration of community situation in bilingual education.

Ghanaians tend to have a more positive attitude towards English than towards their respective mother tongues. This is because the English language is accorded social prestige. Proficiency in English is associated with educational progress and social status and the learning of English ensures greater access to world opportunities. Naturally, the tendency is for people to lean toward the language of higher status, higher income, social acceptance and participation. According to Forbes (1998), the notion of language loyalty is never a simple one because of inherent subjectivity and linguistic attitudes. While some may wish to have their children retain their linguistic identity, others may wish them to shift to English as quickly as possible in order to participate fully in society; yet others may wish to have their children use English in public, but retain the mother tongues for a range of private occasions. Some parents may decide not to transmit the mother tongue to their children at all. There are many possible positions reflecting the different influence of social, political, cultural, and economic factors that we cannot underestimate the power of social attitudes to language. Although English enjoys a very high social prestige among

Ghanaians, the attention paid it is at variance with the limited ability of people to use the language appropriately.

The important role of the mother tongue in primary education is recognised and there is strong support for its use in the early years of primary education. UNESCO (1953) recommends the use of the mother tongue in the primary school because, among other things, children will find it difficult to grasp any new concept, which does not find expression in their mother tongue. Neglect of the mother tongue in a child's education involves the danger of crippling and destroying his productive powers by forcing him to express himself in a language foreign to him. If the African child is to be encouraged from the start to acquire skills and attitudes such as comprehension, manipulative ability, develop curiosity and initiative it should be through the mother tongue medium of instruction, which is his most natural way of learning. Benzies (1961) notes that teachers who want to use English as early as possible as a school language are holding back their pupils mental powers. The early years at school, according to Benzies, should be used to expand the child's background of ideas and their powers of self-expression. The school should widen the experience of the pupil in a meaningful way through the use of the language he speaks. In this way, his further exploration of the world around him is continued with very little linguistic re-orientation.

The use of the mother tongue medium draws attention to teacher training considerations. Bishop (1985, p.190) maintains that "a curriculum is only as good as the quality of its teachers. Positively, a curriculum is enriched by the creativity and imagination of the best teachers; negatively, it is vitiated by the limitations of poor teachers and teacher training. The teacher is, indeed, the heart of the matter". The existence of a multiplicity of mother tongues in Ghana and even of dialects of the same language makes it impossible to use them all as media of instruction. Apart from the Northern and Upper regions of Ghana, four main languages namely, Ga, Twi, Fanti and Ewe are widely spoken and each of these languages has several dialects. Failure to adopt one of these languages to be used as a medium of instruction and communication means different mother tongues are used in different areas. This implies an additional problem of training teachers in a multiplicity of languages. The prescribed use of the local mother tongue spoken in an area as the medium means apart from the very limited number of areas where a common mother tongue prevails, the schools, especially in cosmopolitan areas, have the prerogative to choose which mother tongue to use. This complex situation coupled with the fact that teachers from the country's teacher training institutions

are posted to schools without due regard to the mother tongue they speak or have been trained to teach in has negative pedagogical implications. An effective implementation of the mother tongue medium calls for teachers who do not only speak the various mother tongues, but are trained to teach them and through them. Against this background, insights offered by the responses from 404 primary school teachers (202 males and 184 females) from six out of the ten regions of Ghana (Ashanti, Eastern, Central, Volta, Western and Accra) are considered. These teachers hold certificates from Teacher Training Colleges in Ghana, and have, at least, five years teaching experience in primary schools. They have enrolled for a Diploma in Basic Education programme at the University of Cape Coast. The teachers were purposively sampled in 2003 on their views on language in education and their perceived classroom practice.

**A survey of teachers' perceived classroom language practice**

A survey of 404 primary school teachers' perceived classroom communicative practice gives the following indications:

**Table 1: Teachers' perceived classroom language use and language preference**

Region No. Of Teachers	Medium of Communication and Instruction			Language Preference		
	Mother tongue	English	Code-Switching	Mother tongue	English	
Ashanti	60	11(18.3%)	35(58.3%)	14(23.3%)	9(15%)	51(85%)
Eastern	50	4(8%)	36(72%)	10(20%)	10(20%)	40(80%)
Central	100	13(13%)	72(72%)	15(15%)	28(28%)	72(72%)
Volta	39	10(25.6%)	22(56.4%)	7(17.9%)	9(23%)	30(76.9%)
Western	65	5(7.6%)	42(64.6%)	18(27.6%)	10(15.3%)	55(84.6%)
Greater Accra	90	16(17.7%)	65(72.2%)	9(10%)	18(20%)	72(80%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>59(14.6%)</b>	<b>272(67.3%)</b>	<b>73(18%)</b>	<b>84(20.7%)</b>	<b>320(79.2%)</b>

A minority of teachers use the mother tongue exclusively during the teaching/learning process. In 4 out of the 6 regions surveyed, teachers resort to bilingual code switching as a communication strategy, more than they use the mother tongue. Teachers who use the mother tongue explain that it enables their pupils to learn better from the known to the unknown, facilitate better understanding of concepts, and ensures active participation in lessons because pupils understand what is taught better. Those who favour code switching credit that strategy for taking care of problems posed by both mother tongue and the English language. Code switching, according to these teachers, makes for

easy transfer of information and better explanation of concepts, thus ensuring effective teaching and learning. The communicative functions of code switching in teacher- led talk contribute to our understanding of the pedagogical motivation for code switching patterns. Code switching to check comprehension involves a continuous process of conversation monitoring and adaptation, and this characterizes the bilingual discourse of classrooms where there is considerable disparity between respective proficiencies of teacher and pupils in the language of instruction (Martin-Jones, 1995). Majority of the teachers surveyed, however, use the English medium for instruction and communication. The reasons given, among others, are that the textbooks available for teaching and learning are written in English, and, therefore, they have to translate texts first into the mother tongue before they could teach; the unavailability of teaching/learning resources in the mother tongue makes teaching difficult; the use of the English medium caters for differences in a multilingual context; that primary level one is not the starting point of formal education as most pupils (perhaps except those in the rural areas) would have gone through nursery and kindergarten; that most examinations and interviews are in English and an earlier immersion could result in better examination results and better life chances; and, moreover, teacher training is not organised to take care of the needs of mother tongue instruction and communication and teacher supply in the state/ public schools. As such, very often, teachers themselves are unable to speak freely and easily in the language of the locality in which they find themselves because postings of teachers after training do not take cognisance of what mother tongue the teacher speaks. Even when teachers can speak a local language, it is one thing to have a language, and it is yet another to be able to use it for educational purposes. As a subject, Ghanaian languages are not seriously taught because the number of specially trained teachers for the various languages is woefully inadequate. Though the Ghanaian language is a compulsory subject examinable at the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), it is not a prerequisite for admission into the Senior Secondary Schools. A good pass in English language is a prerequisite. This examination (BECE) is set in English, and the child is expected to express his thoughts and ideas coherently in English. It is, therefore, understandable that the average teacher would want to concentrate his teaching through the language of examination, and, to some extent, ignore the language that is not examinable. It is not surprising that parents and pupils enthusiastically share this view.

When teachers were asked to indicate their perceived proficiency in the English language, the results shown in table 2 below were obtained:

**Table 2: Teachers' perceived proficiency in English language**

<b>Region Teachers</b>	<b>No of</b>	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>Satisfactory</b>	<b>With Difficulty</b>
Ashanti	60	8(13.3%)	35(58.3%)	17(28.3%)
Eastern	50	34(68%)	12(24%)	4(8%)
Central	100	43(43%)	42(42%)	15(15%)
Volta	39	18(46.1%)	12(30.7%)	9(23%)
Western	65	32(49.2%)	18(27.6%)	15(23%)
Accra	90	57(63.3%)	28(31.1%)	5(5.5%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>192(47.5 %)</b>	<b>147(36.3%)</b>	<b>65(16%)</b>

If 52% of teachers surveyed perceived their proficiency in the English language as satisfactory or that they have difficulties with the language, one implication of this, however unintended, is that the root of the problem with English is in the Teacher Training Colleges. It is in the Teacher Training Colleges, therefore, that we should look for a solution to the alleged low standards of English of pupils and the products of our schools. Communicative competence in any language requires more than simply knowing its phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon (Arends, 1991). Speakers of the language need to understand how to organize speech beyond the level of sentences. Effective use of language fosters understanding and cooperation at all levels of social relationships and spoken language plays a central role in learning. In talking to children, parents help them to find words to express as much to themselves and to others their needs, feelings and experiences. Classroom interaction between teachers and pupils, and among pupils, is at the heart of the education process. The centrality of language as a social tool for learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and opportunities for learning through exploratory talk (Barnes, 1976) require a language which is meaningful to children. Generally, one of the factors which militate against the use of English as a medium of instruction is the inability of teachers to cope with the communicative demands of the second language classroom. This does not, however, deny the fact that there are some schools where the staff is competent. In addition to other qualities, the teacher's own language must be adequate.

### **Implication of Findings**

Responses from teachers surveyed indicate that teachers use what language medium they feel comfortable with – mother tongue medium, bilingual code switching and the English medium, even though they might lack proficiency in it. It is clear from the responses of teachers sampled that the implementation of the mother tongue medium policy is fraught with problems and as such, it is generally not adhered to in the schools. There is, therefore, a wide gulf between policy and practice. Considering the serious limitations in the implementation of the mother tongue policy such as, the multiplicity of local languages, lack of teaching/learning materials in the local language and inadequate number of local language teachers, declining public confidence in the effectiveness of the mother tongue medium policy is understandable. However, the falling standards in English cannot be blamed on the failure of a language policy that generally meets with an attitude of non-compliance on the part of classroom teachers. The teachers preference for the use of the English medium throughout primary education, even though they do not consider themselves proficient enough to teach effectively and consistently through that language, and have problems using the language effectively to create opportunity for learning, impacts negatively on the communicative needs of teachers and learners and has very serious implications for teacher training. If classroom teachers themselves have problems with the use of the English language, how can they guide their pupils to develop fluency in the language?

Surely, the language problem lies partly in the fact that what English is taught remains unhelpful to learners. Despite the notion that young children quickly acquire fluency to meet their own primary social needs in any language to which they are exposed naturalistically (Ellis, 1985), there is no evidence to support the effectiveness of an earlier start to school language instruction (Phillipson, 1988). It is important that educational language policy is based on an understanding of children's language development and of how children can be helped to learn through language. Research evidence in the United States of America on Black and Hispanic learners of English as a second language found that where language is being taught incompetently, it hampers and impairs/stalls the learning process and does not enable access to the language, in this case, standard American English (Wong-Fillmore, 1985).

The vital centre of learning English is within the school. As a result, lack of proficiency in English in products of an education system is laid at the doorstep of the schools and classrooms because the English language is inextricably bound up with the

socio-cultural function of schooling (Pennycook, 1998). Written examinations constitute the basis for determining students' level of intelligence or stupidity. The intelligent student is presumed to be one who can express him/herself and articulate his/her views in clear, precise, coherent and impeccable English. Educational failure is thus attributed to linguistic failure. Stubbs (1990) notes that changes in academic fashion have variously attributed educational failure to IQ (1920-40), to home environment (1950s and 1960s), and now (since the 1960s) to language. No single factor, however, can explain why some fail where others succeed. Language, social class, home environment and intelligence are all interdependent. According to Stubbs, the pervasive language environment of schools, the difficulty of separating conventional styles of language from the content of academic subjects; the complex relationship between languages, thinking and educational success make it important for everyone concerned with schools and classrooms to give language careful study.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

A necessary way forward to a viable educational language policy and its successful implementation involves using the realities of classrooms as a starting point for knowledge building. The use of the mother tongue medium cannot be a nation-wide practice. The serious limitations in implementation render the policy unviable. The use of the English medium, the alternative option, is vitiated by lack of proficiency on the part of classroom teachers and consequently, inadequate communicative language practice in the classroom. Under the circumstance, how can we best promote an effective language policy?

Considering the many advantages involved in the use of the mother tongue medium at the primary level, the authors inclination is to support the recommendations made in the report of the President's Committee on Review of Education Reforms in Ghana (Republic of Ghana, 2002). The Committee recommended, among others, that either the local language or English language be used as the medium at the Kindergarten and lower primary level, where teachers and teaching/learning materials are available. That teachers posted to teach at this level should be familiar with the local language. These recommendations were made against the background of the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service making urgent preparations for a more effective implementation of the mother tongue medium by getting more local language teachers trained and ensuring the provision of teaching/learning materials.

Encouraging language awareness on the part of teachers through the pre-service and in-service training curricula is a step in the

socio-cultural function of schooling (Pennycook, 1998). Written examinations constitute the basis for determining students' level of intelligence or stupidity. The intelligent student is presumed to be one who can express him/herself and articulate his/her views in clear, precise, coherent and impeccable English. Educational failure is thus attributed to linguistic failure. Stubbs (1990) notes that changes in academic fashion have variously attributed educational failure to IQ (1920-40), to home environment (1950s and 1960s), and now (since the 1960s) to language. No single factor, however, can explain why some fail where others succeed. Language, social class, home environment and intelligence are all interdependent. According to Stubbs, the pervasive language environment of schools, the difficulty of separating conventional styles of language from the content of academic subjects; the complex relationship between languages, thinking and educational success make it important for everyone concerned with schools and classrooms to give language careful study.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

A necessary way forward to a viable educational language policy and its successful implementation involves using the realities of classrooms as a starting point for knowledge building. The use of the mother tongue medium cannot be a nation-wide practice. The serious limitations in implementation render the policy unviable. The use of the English medium, the alternative option, is vitiated by lack of proficiency on the part of classroom teachers and consequently, inadequate communicative language practice in the classroom. Under the circumstance, how can we best promote an effective language policy?

Considering the many advantages involved in the use of the mother tongue medium at the primary level, the authors inclination is to support the recommendations made in the report of the President's Committee on Review of Education Reforms in Ghana (Republic of Ghana, 2002). The Committee recommended, among others, that either the local language or English language be used as the medium at the Kindergarten and lower primary level, where teachers and teaching/learning materials are available. That teachers posted to teach at this level should be familiar with the local language. These recommendations were made against the background of the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service making urgent preparations for a more effective implementation of the mother tongue medium by getting more local language teachers trained and ensuring the provision of teaching/learning materials.

Encouraging language awareness on the part of teachers through the pre-service and in-service training curricula is a step in the



right direction. A substantial course of language in education as part of every primary and secondary school teacher's initial teacher training, whatever the teacher's subject or age of children with whom he/she will be working with will be appropriate. This will create an opportunity for teachers to gain an understanding of the processes by which children become competent in a second language. These processes can result in either additive bilingualism (Lambert, 1977), in which a second language is gained without detrimental effect on the first; or the result may be subtractive bilingualism, where the child is at risk of a restricted communicative range in the first language, and fails to learn very much at all through inadequate competence in either language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981). Teachers can play their part in the development of good practice in the area of bilingual learning if they are aware of these dangers.

**References**

- Abban, P. (1999) English Language was the problem. *The Ghanaian Times*. No. 12914. Accra. New Times Corporation.
- Aitchinson, J. 1991. *Language Change: Progress or Decay*. UK: Cambridge.
- Arends, R. (1991). *Learning to teach*. New York: McGraw-Hall Inc.
- Asamoah, E.A. (1955). The problem of language in education in the Gold Coast in Africa: *Journal of the international African institute*, Vol. 25, No 1.
- Bagunywa, A.M.K. (1970). The teaching of vernacular languages in primary Schools in Gorman T.P. (Ed). *Language in Education in eastern African* (pp. 25-29) Addis Ababa: Oxford University Press.
- Barnes, D. (1976). *From Communication to Curriculum*. Harmondsworth. Penguin.
- Benzies, D. (1961). *Learning our language*. London: Longmans Green and Co. Ltd.
- Bishop, B. (1985). *Curriculum Development: A Textbook for Students*. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Boadi, L.K.A., (1994). Linguistic Barriers to Communication. In *The Modern World*. Accra: Ghana, Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- Crawford, J. (1996). "Seven Hypotheses on Language Loss: Causes and Cures". (07 June 2002)
- Cummins, J. (1981). *Schooling and language minority studies: A theoretical framework*. Los Angeles: National Evaluation, dissemination and assessment centre.
- Dorian, N.C. 1998. *Western Language Ideologies and Small-Language Prospects*. In L.A. Grenoble; L.J. Whaley. *Endangered Language: Language Loss and Community Response* (pp. 3-21). Cambridge: University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1985). *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Fafunwa. A.B. (1975). Education in the mother tongue: A Nigerian experiment- The six year (Yoruba medium) primary education project at the university of Ife, Nigeria. In *West African journal of education*. Vol. XIX, Number 2. June.
- Fishman, J. (1991). *Reversing Language Shift*. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Forbes, H.D. (1998). *Ethnic Conflict: Commerce, Culture, and the contact Hypothesis*. New Haven and London: Yale U. Press.
- Gachukia, A. (1970). *The teaching of vernacular language in Kenya primary Schools in Gorma., T.P. (Ed) Language in*

- education in eastern Africa* (pp. 18-24) Addis Ababa: Oxford University Press
- Gbedemah, F.K.K. (1975). *Alternative language policies for education in Ghana*. New York: Vantage Press Inc.
- Ghana, (1996). Problems and prospects of the use of Africa languages in education (A Pan-African seminar/workshop report). Accra.
- Goddard, N. (1974). *Literacy: Language experience approaches*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd.
- Gupta, F. A. (2001). "English in the linguistic ecology of Singapore." Paper presented at GNEL/MAVEN: The cultural politics of English in a world language, Freiburg, 6-9 June 2001.
- Hale, K. (1998). On Endangered Languages and the Importance of Linguistic Diversity.
- In L.A. Grenoble & L.J. Whaley. *Endangered Languages: Language Loss and Community Response*. (pp.192-216). Cambridge University Press.
- Lambert, W.E. (1977). The effects of bilingualism on the individual, cognitive and socio-cultural consequences. In P. Hornby (Ed). *Bilingualism: psychological, social and educational implications*. New York. Academic Press.
- Martin-Jones, M. (1995). Code-switching in the classroom: two decades of research. In L. Milroy & P.Mysken (Eds). *One Speaker, Two Languages: cross-disciplinary perspectives on code-switching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mc William, H.O.A. & Kwamena-Poh, M.A. (1975). *The development of education in Ghana*. London: Longman Group Ltd.
- Osei, A. (2000). Which way language policy? The Psychological factor. In *The Ghanaian Times*. New Times Corporation. Accra.
- Owusu-Ansah, A. (2002). Methinks, it must be English III... In *The Daily Graphic* No. 1486461. Accra. Graphic Communications Group Ltd
- Pennycook, A. (1998). *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Phillipson, R. (1988). Linguicism, structures and ideologies in linguistic imperialism. In: T. Skutnabb-Kangas & J. Cummins (Eds). *Minority Education* Clevedon, Avon. Multilingual Matters.
- Seliger, H. & Vago, R. (1991). *First Language Attrition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schmidt, R. (2000). *Language Policy and Identify Politics in the United States*. Philadelphia: Temple U. Press.