



## A cross-cultural analysis of the mother tongue-based multilingual education policies and implementation in developing countries: The case of Asia and Africa

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**Abstract:** All over the world, there are around 7,000 languages spoken but only 300 widespread languages are spoken by majority of the people. In education, language is an essential factor because this is the medium of communication for most learning activities. Thus, the vital role that language plays in the classroom has sparked debates as to what language is to be best used. Many nations have attempted to create different language-in-education policies that would cater not only to the needs of the learners but also the demands of preserving country's native languages. Thus, the emergence of mother tongue education has created numerous and recent research that suggest the benefits of using a learner's mother tongue. These issues have led this present paper to investigate mother tongue-based multilingual education. The paper examined 30 different research articles and journals from developing countries of Asia and Africa with the purpose of providing an in-depth understanding of the different language-in-education policies and mother tongue-based instruction of selected countries. The study also explored the different challenges and pedagogical implications of mother tongue-based instruction to synthesize emerging issues and insights. As a result, socio-political and pedagogical issues were found, namely the devaluation of a nation's mother tongue due to its people's negative perspective and the poor policy planning that was pointed out by different authors. It was also notable that most of these developing communities understand the importance of English as a language of globalization. Because of these issues, incorporating both the importance of establishing mother tongue education and strengthening the English language in the educational system would be two important considerations in policy planning.

**Key Words:** mother tongue-based education; language-in-education policy; mother tongue; multilingualism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2015 marks the 15th anniversary of International Mother Language Day. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), around the world, there are approximately 7,000 languages spoken but only 300 widespread languages were spoken by majority of the people (2003). While some of the countries such as Iceland are linguistically homogenous, most countries such as Indonesia show an abundance of linguistic diversity, with over 700 languages, and Papua New Guinea with over 800 languages. Additionally, UNESCO strongly believes that language is a fundamental attribute of cultural identity and empowerment, both for the individual and the group.

In education, language is an essential factor because this is the medium of communication for most learning activities. Thus, the vital role that language plays in the classroom has sparked debates as to what language is to be best used. These past years, most scholars (Dumatog & Dekker, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2013; Malone, 2007) have well documented the benefits of using mother tongue education. In this language-in-education policy, students use their mother tongue, otherwise called as first language. This is the language they learned first, identify with, and know best.

However, even with great support for quality education, there are still different educational problems faced by students, especially from ethno-linguistic communities. First, some have no access to education at all. Second, those who do have access with education cannot speak the official language when they enter the system. According to UNESCO (2003), students who speak their mother tongues, which are not the same as the official language, find their language, knowledge and experience as a disadvantage. Malone (2007) has enumerated consequences for many students that have been examined in numerous studies, such as loss of confidence, inability to learn, dropping out of school and alienation from heritage and culture. With these challenges in multilingual educational systems, mother tongue-based multilingual education has been coined as the best means for ensuring quality education for the ethno-linguistic communities who speak non-dominant languages.

These issues have led the researchers to investigate mother tongue-based multilingual education. The present paper examines different

research articles and journals from developing countries of Asia and Africa with the purpose of providing an in-depth understanding of the different language-in-education policies and mother tongue-based instruction of selected countries. The study also explores the different challenges and pedagogical implications of mother tongue-based instruction to synthesize emerging issues and insights.

## 2. SELECTION OF STUDIES

This meta-analysis aims to present a selection of relevant studies on mother tongue-based education policies in Asia and Africa for the past ten years (2004-2014). Thirty research papers were selected based on the following: (1) discussion of a developing country's language-in-education policy with specific focus on its instruction using mother tongue, and (2) reflection on emerging issues in implementation. Journal articles were selected from various publications.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

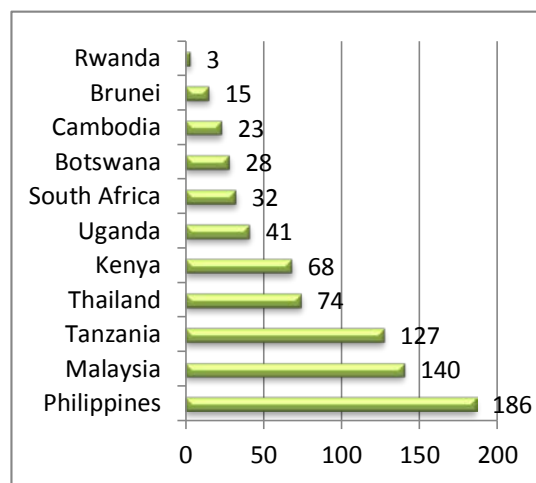


Fig. 1. Estimated number of languages spoken per country

Figure 1 above shows an estimate of the languages spoken in selected developing countries in Asia and Africa. It is therefore interesting to examine how these countries acknowledge this linguistic heterogeneity in the formulation of language-in-

education policies, specifically the implementation of the mother tongue- based multilingual education.

### *3.1. LANGUAGE POLICIES OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES*

Based on the findings, it is evident that majority of the countries, with the exception of Thailand, include English as one of their principal languages. According to Prapasapong (2009), standard Thai is considered their official and legal language. This might also be attributed to the historical fact that Thailand is the only Southeast Asian nation that was not directly colonized, which could have possibly brought foreign languages into the country. This is in contrast to the other countries which were colonized by Western powers, bringing with them foreign languages which were learned by the locals. This was also the case with Rwanda, a French colony, which used French as a principal language until 2008 when it was discarded due to the negative history associated with the language (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

Following these, it is not surprising to note then that English is likewise used as a medium of instruction in most of these countries. This trait is not observable in Cambodia and Thailand. Under the new Education Law in Cambodia, Khmer language should be the language of instruction “in order to strengthen the local knowledge, cultures, and languages of ethnic minorities” (Sun, 2009). Other than English, 10 of these countries still use a local language in the classroom except for Rwanda which interestingly has adopted English as their sole medium of instruction as stipulated in their New Language Policy (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

Lastly, when it comes to the language-in-education policy, it may be observed that the countries which have been noted earlier to use both English and a local language in education, likewise share similar features in mother tongue- based education implementation. One of these similarities is the use of L1 in the formative years of schooling such as in the Philippines, Kenya, and Uganda where L1 is utilized until the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. After which, they are to use English as medium of instruction. In contrary to this, Tanzania is the only country listed which uses mother tongue throughout primary school and only uses English starting secondary school; while in Malaysia, mother tongue is studied as a separate subject.

### *3.2 SOCIO-POLITICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS*

#### *3.2.1. MOTHER TONGUE DEVALUATION*

For the past years, there has been a shift in education systems with the emergence of English imperialism (Canagarajah, 1999 in Wa-Mbaleka, 2015). Scholars have been critical that “Englishization” of language in education could be a threat to the indigenous languages. In the study of Noor Azam (2005, in Jones, 2009), it was noted to having “Malay-English bilingual” Bruneians. This could be due to its country’s historical association with Britain. Brunei’s Ministry of Education believed that indigenous languages “cannot perform the formal and official function as a language of education, compared to Malay and English.” These findings correlate with similar findings of Posel and Casale (2011) that have found out that English was preferred by South African parents and administrators due to its promised economic and social benefits. Similarly, Rwandan government has justified in switching English as their medium of instruction as the leading language of science, commerce and economic growth.

There is also a discrepancy when it comes to the prioritization of the non-dominant languages. For instance, the Philippines has more than 180 languages and Malaysia has approximately 140 languages but there are only very limited orthographies provided. The same case was noted by Nkosana (2011) that “some local languages in Botswana still do not have orthographies.”

#### *3.2.2. POOR POLICY PLANNING*

Some of the challenges that have been pointed out by scholars with regards to the implementation of MTB-MLE were mainly caused by the nations’ poor, or lack of, policy planning. Some of these drawbacks are unavailability of instructional materials, lack of teacher training, and the perception that local languages may not be important for formal language and a disadvantage to future employability.

In the paper of Wa-Mbaleka (2014), he found out that Filipino teachers were not prepared with proper trainings and resources in teaching using mother tongue. This is in correlation with the findings of Gacheche (2010) that some Kenyan teachers lack the ability to teach the mother tongue.



In addition to this, similar challenges have been experienced in South Africa. In the study of Posel and Casale (2011), it was observed that schools were still under-resourced and overcrowded.

These drawbacks might have been prevented if the policy makers made sure first of the preparedness of every element of the program. Instructional materials should have been given a top priority for these resources guide both the students and the teachers in using mother tongue in learning the different subjects. Additionally, teachers must have proper training not just with the content of their subjects but also the background knowledge in teaching the content using the learners' mother tongue. Teachers should have specialized trainings on pedagogical strategies utilizing the MTB-MLE. Lastly, there should be communal unity and participation to successfully implement an educational policy

### 3.3. EMERGING INSIGHTS

The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), as cited by Gacheche (2010), regards mother language as a vital need of children in their formative years. One possible way of responding to the lack of priority of the use of mother tongue is the use of a paradigm called *additive multilingualism*. Samuelson and Freedman (2010) proposed this policy for Rwanda. Instead of English as the sole medium of instruction, they said there is much potential for success if the local language Kinyarwanda would be used as language of instruction in primary school and maintained as students continue to learn and be proficient in other languages.

The present paper has highlighted the first socio-political issue of mother tongue devaluation. If some, if not most, residents of a country think that their mother tongue lacks social and economic importance, abruptly taking out and worse, prohibition of its use will not make their mother tongue seem more important at all. These students will continue to think that their mother tongue does not have the ability to aid in social and economic mobility. Therefore, the perception that a country is better off learning in English after a few years of using mother tongue does not only create linguistically incompetent learners but also ethnolinguistically apathetic citizens.

However, it should not be misunderstood that advocating the use of mother tongue education in this context immediately acknowledges English as

a language that can be escaped and taken away from the people. Looking at the collection of articles considered in this study, it is also notable to say that most of these developing communities still consider the linguistic capital English offers them, a concept introduced by Pierre Bourdieu.

The Rwandan government looks at this from a lens which considers English as "the leading language of science, commerce and economic development" (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Another example of this is in Botswana where parents also prefer that their children learn and speak in English for its social and economic benefits (Nkosana, 2011). Pennycook (1994) was also cited by Nkosana with his works in the global influence of English that would make it difficult, if not impossible, to prioritize Kiswahili over English in Tanzania.

Considering all these insights, both the importance of establishing mother tongue education, and the concept of linguistic capital associated with the English language, a solution of incorporating them in the educational system would be the way to go.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

This meta-analysis has provided a synthesized overview of different language-in-education policies of representative developing countries from Asia and Africa. The paper also presented issues into two main frames: the devaluation of mother tongue and poor policy-planning. It was recommended to have a review of the policies to possess some drawbacks both on paper and in actual practice. Considering the limitations of this paper, it is also suggested that further studies be conducted on the progress of the implementation of the programs several years after they have been carried out. With all the findings and insights gained in this meta-analysis, it was concluded that the importance of improving mother tongue education should always be a top priority as it will provide the scaffolds to learning other languages such as English. After all, multilingual nations should look at their ethnolinguistic diversity as an asset and not as a liability.

## 5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge Dr. Paolo



Valdez for his insightful comments regarding our paper and for pushing us to always ask questions.

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