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## The Language that Works at the Lower Primary Level: The Views of Curriculum Implementers in the Central Region of Ghana

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### **Abstract:**

*The study examined the views of teachers and head teachers concerning the language of instruction that works well at the lower primary level of public basic schools in the Central Region of Ghana. Ghana, which is a multilingual country, uses the mother tongue at the lower primary levels of all its public schools according to the suggestion made by the Anamuah Mensah Committee on curriculum review. The study employed the descriptive survey design, using closed-ended questions and structured interviews, in collecting the views of 370 lower primary class teachers and 78 head teachers of purposively selected basic schools in the region. The results of the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics, frequencies and percentages whilst that of the structured interviews was done by grouping like responses and subsequently being analysed using frequencies. It was found out that the majority of teachers liked to use the bilingual medium, both the dominant mother tongue and English, in teaching since to them, the bilingual medium helped pupils to understand concepts better. Again, both teachers and head teachers regarded the bilingual medium as appropriate in teaching the child in the lower primary since apart from the pupils grasping the concepts taught, it again offered the pupils the opportunity in grasping some vocabulary in English for future use. The results collected meant that using the dominant mother tongue in the bilingual medium puts the other minority groups represented in the class in a disadvantaged position. Thus, schools should move from using a bilingual medium to using a trilingual medium in teaching so all pupils will benefit from lessons taught or there could be the mapping out of schools according to languages so that all pupils could be taught in their own mother tongues.*

**Keywords:** Language of instruction, bilingual medium, mother tongue, lower primary

### **1. Introduction**

The language of instruction for any country is of utmost importance as it can bring about the success or failure of that country's education (Obanya, 1999). This failure will result because education is the backbone of every economy as it 'plays a fundamental role in human, social and economic development' (UNESCO, 2011. p. 7). Thus for every economy to progress, the citizens of that country must have been educated in order to effectively man the various sectors of that economy. For education to be meaningful to the learner, the language being used in instruction should be a favourable one in order for that learner to grasp the concepts being taught and also understand what is being taught. Qorro (2006), defines language of instruction as the vehicle through which education is delivered from teachers to learners and among learners. The language of instruction in Ghana's basic schools has been so unstable (Owu-Ewie, 2006) since the colonial era. In 2007, the then government of Ghana set up a curriculum review committee, the Anamuah Mensah Committee, which suggested that, the language of instruction should be a dominant Ghanaian language spoken in an area where a school was sited. The Government White Paper which was issued subsequently on the language of instruction stated that since Ghana is a multi-lingual state, there was the need to establish an early and routine acquaintance with the second language so as to make the pupils proficient in the language by the end of the primary school (p. 14-15). Thus though the White Paper agreed with the use of the mother tongue, it also mentioned that there should be an early introduction or the early usage of English. It can be deduced from the Government White Paper that the bilingual medium where both English and the mother tongue will be used in teaching concepts was being promoted. It is however not known if these two languages were to be used side-by-side or to be used one after the other. It is also not known if these languages were to follow some percentages in usage.

In 2009/2010 academic year, a language teaching approach, dubbed National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP), with the assistance of the United States Agency for International Development Agency (USAID) was implemented in all public basic schools in the country. This approach was to use both the mother tongue of the pupils and English at certain percentages, in instruction. Teaching materials; pupils' books, readers, conversational posters, alphabet cards and Teacher Guides were supplied to all schools, to aid teaching and learning in the two languages. Evaluation studies that were conducted after the implementation, reported of teacher challenges with regards to using the materials and pupils' inability to read in both the mother tongue and in English (Research Triangle Institute, 2012, 2014). These

studies proved that, teachers had not understood and cannot use the NALAP concept. Due to the many challenges teachers faced with the NALAP, many schools abandoned it. In a study conducted by Torto (2018) on Pedagogical issues in the national literacy acceleration programme in basic schools in the Central Region of Ghana, it was realised that teachers are illiterate in the local languages spoken in the area where schools are sited. Clearly, this illiteracy could be one of the main reasons the NALAP approach was abandoned. The reason is that teachers were required to read and write in the local language as well as in English, and most teachers saw it as a challenge. In 2014, another programme, Learning, was introduced. This programme which is also a USAID Ghana Partnership for Education programme, was to assist Ghana's educational institutions with the goal of improving and sustaining learning outcomes. The programme aimed at improving, expanding and sustaining the reading performance for primary school learners nationwide and to foster understanding of concepts, focusing on primary one to three pupils (The Ghanaian Times, 2015). This programme also came with teaching and learning materials that will aid teachers in their daily work. However, the language of instruction remained mostly the mother tongue, with English being used as a support for the mother tongue.

In both programmes introduced in Ghana by USAID, it will be realized that teachers needed to be literate in the mother tongue of pupils in order to scaffold pupils to read in the mother tongue which will later serve as a springboard to learn to read in English (Cummins, 1979). However, the training that teachers received from these programmes did not focus on the reading and writing in the local languages. The Ghana Education Service allows for the transfer of teachers from one area to another. Again, since Ghana is a multilingual country, the pupils who attend these public schools could also come from different linguistic background, thus choosing a particular mother tongue to be used as the language of instruction could be challenging. The Anamuah Mensah curriculum review committee did not solicit the views of the classroom teacher concerning the language that could be used for instruction in their classrooms. The RTI studies did not also consider the views of teachers, however, teachers are asked to use the local language at some point in their teaching. If the teacher's local language is not similar to the pupils' language, then there could be a huge challenge. If the teacher considers the individual backgrounds of the pupils they teach, they will be in the best position to select the language that will suit the pupils best, other than that, the education of the country could be plunged into doom. Furthermore, if the head teacher of a school is not in favour of a particular medium to be used in the school, the teachers' work could be challenging since there could be constant interference in the teachers' work by the head teacher. It therefore becomes imperative to find out from teachers as well as the head teachers, what medium works well in their various classrooms and schools. This study therefore finds out from teachers, their views concerning a particular language of instruction that Ghana has ever used and to also solicit both teachers and head teachers' views on the language of instruction they consider appropriate in their teaching so as to have interactive lessons.

### *1.1. Research Questions*

- What are the views of teachers on the use of a particular language of instruction?
- What language of instruction do teachers and head teachers consider appropriate in teaching in their various classrooms?

## **2. Empirical Study on the Language of Instruction Teachers Prefer in Other English as a Second Language (E.S.L) Countries**

There have been various studies conducted on the perceptions of teachers on the use of a particular language of instruction in ESL African countries especially since Africa is mostly multilingual. In a study conducted by Issa and Yamada (2014) on the 'Stakeholders' perception of language of instruction policy in Malawian primary schools and its implications for the quality of education', the researchers used both quantitative and qualitative means in collecting data from students, teachers, head teachers and a district education manager in the Mangochi district. According to the researchers, the languages of instruction in this area are Chichewa, a local language which is also a major language, and then English. They observed that both languages were used in most of the lessons even though there is a third language, Chiayao, which is more popular than Chichewa, used among pupils, mostly outside the classroom. The study revealed that in Mangochi, Chichewa is the major language of instruction for the first 4 years of primary education whereas Chiayao is used for further explanation where students have a challenge with understanding certain concepts taught in Chichewa, then from primary 5, both English and Chichewa are used for instruction. According to the teachers used in this study, using Chichewa and Chiayao allows them to explain concepts in the language they think pupils will understand better, however, they pointed out that they lacked teaching and learning materials that are produced in the local languages. There was also the challenge of posting teachers regardless of their mother tongues and the fact that teachers are not trained to teach in any language apart from Chichewa. Due to these setbacks, the majority of teachers and the district education manager favoured the English instructions for the primary over the local language instruction.

In a qualitative study conducted by Njoroje and Gathigia (2011) on 'teachers' perceptions on the use of African language in the curriculum: a case study of schools in Kenya', it came to light that 100% of teachers involved in the study agreed that the use of the mother tongue as a language of instruction was beneficial to learners. The teachers however stated some challenges in using the mother tongue as the lack of teachers who have been trained to teach the various mother languages. Teachers again cited the lack of instructional materials in teaching the African languages and then the push for language of wider communication as other challenges besetting the use of the mother tongue.

In yet another study conducted by Igboanusi (2008), on 'mother tongue-based bilingual education in Nigeria: attitudes and practice', data were collected from stakeholders of education, that is, university staff who were parents, university students, ministry of education staff, secondary school teachers, secondary school students, primary school

pupils and primary classroom teachers. At the end of the study, it was revealed that 100 teachers out of the 125 primary teachers, wanted a form of bilingual education (either English mostly with mother tongue, equal English and mother tongue percentages or mother tongue mostly with English), when they were asked what language of instruction they would choose if they were in a position to do so. This reveals that the primary class teachers used for the study wanted the bilingual language of instruction (mother tongue and English). Only 1 teacher wanted the mother tongue only medium according to the data displayed. The reason for opting for the bilingual medium was because of the advantage bilingualism came with, the advantage of speaking two languages. Igboanusì however posits that bilingual education is not provided in most minority languages as these languages are not 'developed enough for use in the school system' (p. 730). The researcher also cited the lack of personnel to teach in the developed minority languages and he also cited the mixed ethnic backgrounds of pupils as another challenge.

In a mixed method study conducted by Gudyanga, Wadesango and Dzirikure (2015) on 'Parents' and teachers' perceptions on the use of language in early childhood development in Norton district', where data were collected from 80 respondents comprising 50 parents, 30 teachers, it was revealed that whilst the majority of parents preferred the use of English only medium, the majority of teachers preferred the bilingual, English and Shona as the language of instruction. Teachers stated among other reasons that theirs was a multilingual country and so the use of a particular mother tongue only may put some pupils in a disadvantaged position. Rather, using both English and the local language will benefit all learners. Even though the population of the study site was almost homogeneous, with 96.3% of residents being Shona speakers, the teachers still cited multilingualism as a reason for opting for the bilingual medium. They again added that, concepts taught were best understood if both the mother tongue and English were used since the use of both languages offered the teacher the chance to clarify concepts.

Similarly, in a cross sectional study conducted by Tackie-Ofosu, Mahama, Tetteh-Dosoo, Kumador and Toku (2015) on 'mother tongue usage in Ghanaian pre-schools; Perceptions of parents and teachers', it was revealed once again that teachers preferred the use of the bilingual medium at the preschool as its use made teaching and learning effective.

All these studies cited, prove that in Africa, where English is not a native language, teachers prefer the use of some mother tongue education, however, because English is a second language for these countries, a form of a bilingual medium is much preferred by teachers since they need to introduce pupils to the second language which will be needed for higher education whilst at the same time helping pupils to understand the concepts taught better. In Ghana, another multilingual nation that uses English as a second language, it is not really known what language teachers at the basic school prefer to use in teaching. The study by Tackie-Ofosu et al (2015), took place in a preschool. It is not really known what teachers at the lower primary level of public basic schools might want. The other studies took place outside Ghana and so the views/perceptions of the teachers used might be different from that of Ghanaian teachers. It is therefore imperative to find out from teachers in Ghana their language preference in teaching. Thus this study though might be similar to other studies conducted elsewhere, is still different from these other studies.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey, where questionnaire and structured interviews were used in collecting data for the study. The study used a sample size of 390 lower primary teachers who answered the questionnaire, and 78 head teachers of primary schools who responded to structured interview questions in order to collect their views on the language of instruction which should be used in the primary schools. There are 20 districts in the Central Region however, 6 of them were purposively selected for the study since there seem to have people with different mother tongues living in those areas because of major markets and the presence of government jobs in those areas as well as being either the capital city or being near to the capital city. These districts were: Cape Coast, Komenda Edina Eguafo Abream (KEEA), Effutu, Mfantseman, Awutu Senya East and Agona West districts. These areas mentioned were very likely to have schools where the pupils had come from different linguistic backgrounds. In each of the districts, 13 schools were again purposively selected, being careful to select schools in the district capitals and other major towns. The reason for this selection was still to be sure to use schools where pupils were very likely to come from different linguistic backgrounds. Again, because the district education offices happen to be found in the district capitals, schools in these areas were most likely to receive frequent visits from the education officers such as the circuit supervisors, the inspectorate team and even the district director of education, as compared to schools outside the district capitals. Therefore all things being equal, teachers who taught in schools in the district capitals were more likely to conform to the principles and goals of the Ghana Education Service. In each of the selected schools, all 5 lower primary teachers (K.G 1.-P3) were selected to answer the questionnaire. Using all the teachers in a school would paint a better picture of what pertains to the school concerning the language of instruction than selecting some of the teachers in a school. Again, the 78 head teachers of the schools initially selected were also involved in the study. The questionnaire was made up of a 5-point Likert scale that spanned 'No agreement' to 'Agree to a high extent' in seeking answers to the research questions.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1. Research Question 1

'What are the opinions of teachers in the public basic schools in the Central Region on the use of a particular language of instruction?' This research question sought to find out from teachers their views on the use of a particular language of instruction. Questionnaire was used to collect the data in order to answer the question. The responses of teachers have been presented in Table 1.

Statement	Frequency/Percentage				
	1	2	3	4	5
I like the English-only medium because it allows me to express myself in my teaching better	228(61.6)	96(25.9)	32(8.6)	12(3.2)	2(.5)
I like the English-only medium because my pupils Understand my lessons better when I use it	258(70)	75(20.3)	23(6.2)	9(2.4)	4(1.1)
I like the local Language because my Pupils participate better when I use it	11(3.0)	39(10.5)	73(19.7)	124(33.5)	123(33.2)
I like the to mix the local and the English languages because my pupils understand concepts as well as learn the English	13(3.5)	21(5.7)	57(15.4)	134(36.2)	145(39.2)
I like the bilingual medium because using it makes me express myself better	33(8.9)	20(5.4)	67(18.1)	143(38.6)	107(28.9)

*Table 1: Views of Teachers on Their Choice of a Language of Instruction  
Source: Field Survey, Torto (2017)*

- Scale 1: no agreement  
2: agree to a low extent  
3: agree to a moderate extent  
4: agree to a high extent  
5: agree to a very high extent

Data collected revealed that the majority of the teachers (218), forming 58.9% did not use the English only medium. They wanted a medium other than the English-only medium since to them that medium will help pupils better. However, 41.1% of teachers, that is 152 teachers, had some varying levels of agreement with the English only medium, thus these teachers had some degree of likeness for the English-only medium. Out of the number of those who had some agreement, 33 respondents agreed from a high extent to a very high extent to the statement, showing that quite a significant number of teachers wanted the English-only medium in their classrooms whilst others wanted some English instruction in their classrooms. Two hundred and eighty-eight (288) forming 61.6% respondents also disagreed with the fact that the English only medium allows them to teach their pupils better. This revelation shows that the respondents do not rely on the English medium alone in order to teach well. This result could mean that teachers teach regardless of the medium through which their lessons are delivered, be it English, vernacular or a combination of both.

The responses of teachers could also mean that they either employ the bilingual medium or the local/mother tongue medium alone in their teaching. A significant number of respondents stated some level of agreement though. Whilst 96 respondents (25.9%) had a low agreement to the statement, 12.3% of the respondents demonstrated a moderate to a very high extent of agreement. This information then shows that even though most teachers do not rely on the English only medium, some others use this medium since they are able to express themselves better in their teaching. It is very likely that those teachers who do not use the local/mother tongue medium might not be Fante speakers and that their mother tongue might be mutually unintelligible with the Fante language. Further questions revealed that teachers use the local language medium because the pupils understand the lessons better when they are taught in this medium. The majority of teachers (258) forming 70% stated that pupils do not understand lessons well when they are taught in the English only medium. This further means that, 30% of teachers had varying agreement to the statement. Thus in these classrooms where pupils tend to understand lessons in English, teachers may either code-mix English with a local language or use English solely since to them, the English code is not a barrier to the understanding of concepts. This result again reveals that in these lower primary classrooms, teachers might not be speakers of pupils' mother tongue and so in order for them to communicate with pupils, they fall on the English mode which seems to be a universal language in Ghanaian schools. It may also mean that the pupils in these classes where English is used might be coming from different linguistic backgrounds and so using the local language of the majority of pupils might not help the minority language speakers. Two hundred and forty-seven (247) teachers forming 66.7% of the sample used however stated to a high extent that their pupils understand lessons better when they are taught in the local language even though 112 teachers demonstrated a low agreement to a moderate agreement. This result shows that though there are classrooms where pupils understand instructions in the English language, they also understand instructions in the local language. Eleven (11) teachers however stated a no agreement to the statement showing that in 3% of classrooms, pupils do not participate well in class discussions due to the local language used. It is significant to state that 3% though insignificant if compared with 97%, is still of some relevance to the medium teachers use in their lessons. This result shows that some teachers prefer the English only medium or a combination of the two codes in teaching due to the calibre of pupils they teach as 96.5% of teachers recorded that they preferred the bilingual medium since it helped pupils to understand concepts better.

#### 4.2. Discussion of the Research Question 1

The results of the question has shown that teachers use some mother tongue medium in instruction since teaching the pupils in a language they understand helps them grasp the concepts better. This finding is consistent with that of Njoroje et al (2011), who reported that teachers in Kenya also saw the mother tongue instruction as beneficial to pupils. However, the teachers in the Central Region of Ghana wanted to use some English language so that pupils whose mother

tongue is not spoken in the school could also benefit. Thus these teachers saw the bilingual medium as favourable for instruction in a multilingual society. This finding is also consistent with findings made by Igboanusi, 2008; Gudyanga et al, 2015 and Tackie-Ofosu et al, 2015 who saw the bilingual medium as helpful when used in a multilingual classroom. However, if the bilingual medium is used, it could become difficult for the minority language groups to grasp concepts since instruction is delivered in languages that are not their mother tongues. It then becomes important for instruction to be delivered in diverse mother tongues of pupils represented in the class in order not to put any child at a disadvantage.

Research Question 2: What language of instruction do teachers and head teachers consider appropriate in their teaching and learning processes? This research question sought to find out from teachers the language of instruction they needed to use considering the language background and academic level of their pupils. Again, questionnaire was used to gather data on the question. The results have been presented in Table 2.

Statement	Frequency/Percentage (%)					Mean	Std. D
	1	2	3	4	5		
Using the mother-tongue of the child is appropriate in teaching the child	29(7.8)	23(6.2)	53(14.3)	156(42.3)	109(29.5)	3.7919	1.16286
Using the English language is appropriate in teaching the child	148(40.2)	86(23.4)	82(22.3)	40(10.9)	12(3.3)	2.1359	1.15691
Using both the mother-tongue and the English language in the same lesson is appropriate	22(6.0)	11(3.0)	57(15.4)	152(41.2)	127(34.4)	3.9512	1.07481

*Table 2: Language of Instruction Teachers Find Appropriate in the Teaching and Learning Process*

*Source: Field Survey, Torto (2017)*

#### Scale

- 1: no agreement
- 2: agreement to a low extent
- 3: agreement to a moderate extent
- 4: agreement to a high extent
- 5: agreement to a very high extent

The results have shown that a greater majority of respondents, 265 representing 71.7% agreed from a high extent to a very high extent to the fact that using the mother tongue of the child is appropriate in teaching the child. Few teachers, 29 representing 7.8%, however did not agree to this fact. The reason for disagreeing to this fact could be as a result of not being able to speak the mother tongue of the child or that they are against the mother tongue medium. To buttress the stand by the majority of teachers on the use of the mother tongue, a statement that finds out from teachers whether the English only medium is appropriate was posed. 148 teachers representing 40.2% demonstrated a no agreement to the statement. Furthermore, when teachers were asked whether they found the bilingual medium appropriate, 279 teachers forming 75.6% agreed from a high extent to a very high extent to this statement. Sixty-eight (68) teachers also forming 45.4% also had some form of agreement. However, 6.0% of teachers demonstrated a no agreement on the issue. Thus the majority of teachers found the bilingual medium appropriate. A descriptive statistics was again calculated to find the mean and the standard deviation on the research question for further analysis.

The means and the standard deviation on the language of instruction teachers find appropriate in the teaching and learning process showed a mean of 3.7919 for the statement that finds out from teachers whether they liked the mother tongue medium. The mean shows that the responses were a little above moderate revealing an above average stand by teachers. However, the mean for that of the statement that finds out whether the bilingual medium was appropriate was higher than the mean for the mother tongue medium. This result means that though teachers regard the mother tongue medium as appropriate, they see the bilingual medium as more appropriate as it makes teaching easier and pupils get to grasp the concepts taught whilst learning some English as well. Data were also collected from head teachers concerning the medium they thought was better in concept delivery. The responses of these head teachers have been tabulated based on the uniformity in responses and presented as Table 3.

Medium	Frequency	Percentage
Mother tongue (L1)	2	2.6
English (L2)	16	20.5
Bilingual with more English	17	21.8
Bilingual with equal English & Local language	43	55.1
Total	78	100

Table 3: Tabulated Responses of Head Teachers

Source: Field Survey, Torto (2017)

Data collected from the head teachers within the region also revealed that a greater majority was in favour of the bilingual language of instruction. Sixty (60) head teachers representing 76.9%, reported that they preferred the bilingual medium. Out of this majority, 17 head teachers preferred more English component than the local language component explaining that since the pupils already spoke their mother tongues, they needed to learn the English language, dwelling on their mother tongues for understanding of concepts. They also maintained that even though the pupils need to understand what they are taught and so the mother tongue is to be used, these pupils also need some English for a smooth switch to the English-only medium when they get to primary four. Sixteen (16) head teachers however wanted the English only medium, citing the fact that the pupils needed to be taught in English since all examination questions, except Ghanaian language, were set in English. These head teachers again mentioned that the pupils already use their mother tongues at home and on the school's premises therefore teaching them in their local languages will be doing them a disservice. These head teachers stated that children need to be taught in the L2, so that they get to grasp some vocabulary in order to make good English constructions and to become confident speakers of English. These heads went on to argue that the private schools outperform the public schools even though these private schools are instructed in English, so instructing pupils in English is not a bad idea. Some heads who opted for the English-only medium went on to say that English is Ghana's lingua franca and it becomes a problem for the pupils when they are not able to communicate in it outside the school. Only 2 forming 2.6% head teachers mentioned that they wanted their pupils to be instructed solely in the local language. These heads explained that teaching the pupils in their local languages will enable them to understand the concepts taught better.

#### 4.3. Discussion of Results

The results gathered have revealed that teachers see the bilingual medium as more appropriate since the pupils get to hear teaching done in their own mother tongue. Teaching done in the pupils' mother tongue and in English results in them understanding the concepts taught as well as giving pupils the opportunity to learn English in context whilst grasping some vocabulary for future expressions. Teachers however want to have more English than the mother tongue in the bilingual medium so as to prepare the pupils for a smooth switch to the English only medium from primary 4 onwards. Thus teachers, the curriculum implementers, agree with the Government White Paper (GOV, 2004) on the medium that must be used in basic schools in the country.

#### 5. Conclusion

The study has revealed that teachers in the Central Region of Ghana use the bilingual medium (the major mother tongue spoken in the school and English) since this medium enables them to teach concepts to pupils whilst at the same time teaching some English to them. They also see this bilingual medium, with higher English percentage as more appropriate in teaching the pupils so as to prepare them for the future. Thus in Ghana, lower primary teachers use the bilingual medium (major mother tongue of the area where the school is sited and English) in teaching, ignoring the minority languages that happen to be the mother tongues of some of the pupils in the class.

#### 6. Recommendations

Ghana being a multilingual country needs either a trilingual education where more than one mother tongue is used with the English language in order not to put pupils whose mother tongues are not spoken by the majority, in any disadvantaged position. There is also the need to map out schools according to the local languages spoken in the area so that pupils who speak a particular mother tongue could be placed in schools that use that language.

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