Mother Tongue Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has been a focus and concern of national governments and international donors for decades; yet despite the attention, educational results have been poor. Impressive gains have been made in enrollment, but in actual learning, school completion, and adult literacy, SSA lags behind much of the world. There are many reasons for these deficiencies, but a central issue is the use of foreign languages as the languages of instruction. In classrooms across the continent, students arrive in primary school and are expected to begin reading, writing, and learning in a language they do not speak and have little, if any, exposure to outside of class. The practice of using English, French, or Portuguese, in SSA schools is part of a colonial legacy that has left much damage and few benefits to the region. The approach might have served the needs of colonial administrators but has not, and will not, serve the present and future needs for an educated populace and higher levels of human capital. The use of local language in primary education, also called mother-tongue education (MTE), when done correctly, has been demonstrated to improve educational outcomes. Examples from across the continent—from former French, English, and Portuguese colonies—demonstrate both the benefits to be gained from MTE and the persistent challenges and obstacles to implementing these policies in primary schools. Given the colonial legacy and the generally poor educational outcomes across SSA, transitioning to mother-tongue education in primary schools could improve academic performance.

African Languages

Boasting roughly 2,000 distinct languages, few places on earth can compare with Africa’s
linguistic diversity and richness. As national boundaries in Africa were mostly decided by European powers at the 1885 Berlin conference, with practically no knowledge of the distribution of ethnic groups, many languages transcend borders. Languages like Hausa, Wolof, Shona, and Fang are spoken in multiple countries. Fulfulde alone is spoken by over 11 million Fula in 15 different West and Central African countries (Alidou et al. 2005). Some languages have become lingua francas, spoken by many as a second or third language to facilitate communication and commerce. Kiswahili, for example, is spoken by roughly 15 million people as a first language, and 80 million as a second or third language in 10 East African countries. Additionally, there are the imported languages brought in by colonizers, proselytizers, and traders. Arabic arrived first through commerce and religious instruction and conquest, and was soon followed by the European colonial languages: English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and German. Finally, there are the hybrid and novel languages that have evolved from European languages, such as Afrikaans and Krio. Of all of these languages, English, French, and Portuguese hold the greatest sway in Sub-Saharan African formal education and government. Despite not being spoken by millions of African, these languages have a tight hold on many educational systems.

Colonial Education

During the colonial period, formal education in Africa was primarily a means of proselytizing or developing the minimum number of functionaries required to run the skeletal colonial administrations. Since the higher positions in these administrations were all Europeans, secondary and tertiary education was mostly ignored (Rodney, 2006). A British statement in India—though applicable to the African case as well—justified colonial education as a means to create “a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of
persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (cited in Watson, 2007). This quotation beautifully captures the colonial interest in educating only a small number of locals to serve as intermediaries between the empire and its subjects. The proof is in the pitiful education statistics from most of the continent prior to independence: in Senegal, France’s prized West African colony, there were only 174 students in secondary school in 1946; upon gaining independence, the Congo, a former Belgian colony of 22 million inhabitants, had 16 secondary school graduates (Rodney, 2006). Many African leaders, such Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela, and Kenneth Kaunda were educated in religious or mission-run schools (Meredith, 2011). Missionary schools often allowed the use of local language for the first few years of education, and many missionaries were instrumental in turning spoken African languages into written ones (Watson, 2007). Rather than reflecting an appreciation of local African languages, the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, explained this as the European missionary believing “too much in his mission of conquest not to communicate it in the languages most readily available to the people” (Ngũgĩ, 1998). Regardless, secondary schools and any advanced education was in the language of the metropole, which produced inequalities in society between those who could speak a European language and those who couldn’t. Thus, advancement in the civil service, one of the few avenues of formal employment, was closed to a vast majority of Africans, to the benefit of elites and expatriates (Alidou et al., 2005). Today, across much of the continent, this structure remains in place, with European languages being the official languages of government and higher education for a majority of countries.

Post-Independence Education

Education in SSA, despite coming a long way since independence, has produced limited results. While enrollment numbers, particularly in primary school, have risen dramatically in the
last few decades, the quality of education is still poor. A 2015 UNESCO report found that Sub-Saharan Africa has almost 30 million primary school-aged children out of school, more than half of the global total. Additionally, only 7 of 31 nations would achieve universal primary school education by 2015, and of all students who did enter primary school, 42% would not reach the final year. Inequalities in education were increasing in many countries, particularly with regards to students pertaining to religious and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and often girls (UNESCO, 2015). As primary schools are where European languages are first formally introduced to most students, their performance and results are particularly pertinent to this discussion. At the secondary school level, gender disparities remain a consistent challenge, with only Swaziland reaching gender parity. Adult education has also come along slowly, with only a 2 percent increase in the region-wide adult literacy rate in the past 15 years, from 57% to 59%, and an overall increase in the number of illiterate adults to roughly 197 million (UNESCO, 2015). Since Sub-Saharan Africa’s population is growing so quickly, without drastic steps to improve education, it will fall only further behind the rest of the world. Fortunately, multilingual education is slowly spreading on the continent. While only 20 African countries used some local language in primary schools at the time of independence, today 38 countries do (UNESCO, 2015).

**Mother-Tongue Education**

When done well, mother-tongue education (MTE) is more effective than second language (L2) education. Research has shown that education in students’ mother tongue improved learning and self-confidence, reduced dropout rates, and eased the students’ adjustment to school (cited in Vawda and Patrinos, 1999). Learning a first language well, and being able to read it, also assists in learning a second language (cited in Vawda and Patrinos, 1999). Children are adept learners,
and in multilingual African communities, they often pick up several languages: those at home, those of their playmates, those at the market, or those at school. However, studies demonstrate that the, usually oral, second or third language use of children is not comparable to the language proficiency required for formal learning. For mother-tongue education to be effective, it must continue through at least the sixth year of school. Additionally, literacy in students’ first language must be developed within the first 4 years of education, and this literacy must involve in-depth interaction with texts that allows for learning other subjects, like math or science. If this level of literacy is not reached before students switch to L2, many of the learning gains are lost and students fall behind other learners who had been sticking to a single language the whole time, whether mother-tongue or not (Alidou et al., 2006). Under ideal conditions, it takes 6 years to learn a language well enough to use it for complicated and abstract learning. As most Sub-Saharan African schools do not provide ideal conditions to their students, it likely takes even longer in this region (Alidou et al., 2006).

Another benefit of MTE is that it improves the quality of teaching and the classroom environment. When a teacher in Burkina Faso, for example, is teaching a class of six-year old Mooré speakers entirely in French, the options and possibilities of classroom activities and interactions are severely limited. The teacher must speak a majority of the time, as the students are unable to contribute in L2. Traditional pedagogical techniques such as repetition, memorization, and chorus teaching are common while lessons plans that require critical thinking and subtle and complex language-use are impossible (Alidou et al., 2006). When early learning is restricted to this narrow approach, it conditions students and teachers to continue these practices even later when their L2 proficiency allows for more interactive and participatory
pedagogy. This teacher-centered style of education is increasingly falling out of favor in developed nations and if SSA does not adapt, its students will continue to fall behind\(^1\).

Mother-tongue education also permits for the integration of local customs and traditions into the classroom. When lessons and curricula are entirely in a European language, community information and knowledge is lost or silenced. Additionally, MTE allows for vastly increased parental participation in the education of children—parents who are generally excluded from formal L2 environments, to their and their children’s detriment. By better integrating community and family members into education through the use of local language, students will be exposed to a more comprehensive variety of learning opportunities (Alidou et al., 2006).

The Six Year Primary Project in Nigeria in the 1970s set up an experiment where one group of primary school students was taught in Yoruba, while in primary school, while a control group was taught English as in most schools in Nigeria. Results demonstrated that the Yoruba-educated students performed better than the English-educated students in every single subject, including English, supporting the idea that mastery of a first language will facilitate learning of a second (cited in Bunyi, 1999). The following three case studies and examinations of mother-tongue and second language education in various Sub-Saharan African countries offer a more complete picture of the benefits, challenges, and failures of MTE, and will demonstrate how this debate transcends borders and remains relevant in former Portuguese, French, and English colonies.

**Cameroon (Moore, 1999)**

Leslie Moore’s investigation into how language use in schools differs from typical

\(^1\) Some SSA countries (Botswana, Namibia, Malawi, South Africa, and Ethiopia) have moved toward learner-centered pedagogy (UNESCO, 2015)
language use in a Cameroonian community demonstrates some of the pitfalls of L2 education. Interviews were conducted in a village in the Mandara Mountains of Cameroon to gain an idea of community views on the local schools. Among community members, language learners have a plethora of options for communicating and acquiring proficiency. For example, children are able to listen and absorb a second or third language as they please, not worrying about responding to a teacher’s questions or assignments, and are able to remain silent for as long as they want. When communication is required, children can use their mother-tongue, which will probably be understood in the local community, use non-verbal communication, or they can use the L2 that they are comfortable with. Unlike in a classroom, grammatical mistakes in L2 will not draw sanction or comment in the market or among family and friends. L2 speakers, if speaking directly to the child will also alter their language and incorporate mother-tongue words to clarify meaning. Additionally, children using L2 to communicate are doing so out of their own volition, incentivizing them to learn the language, as opposed to students repeating songs or memorizing facts in class with no tangible benefit to them. Additionally, outside of school children speak mostly to each other and are often expected to be quiet around adults. In class however, students are not allowed to speak to each other, and are expected to speak confidently to the teacher, answering his or her questions when necessary. This disconnect between cultural and educational system practices is exacerbated by the mother-tongue/French proficiency gap, and supports the argument that MTE is more compatible with local customs.

Mozambique (Benson, 2000)

In 1993, the Mozambican government began implementing the Projecto de Escolarização Bilingue em Moçambique (PEBIMO) in primary schools in the provinces of Tete and Gaza. While Mozambique uses Portuguese as the language of instruction, at the time of the study, 75%
of Mozambicans spoke only local languages, while 24% spoke Portuguese as a second language. Only 1% of Mozambicans spoke Portuguese as a first language. The students participating in PEBIMO spoke mostly Cinyanja and Xichangana. Studies of classrooms had found that teachers spoke for 90% of class time, while students sat silently, ostensibly learning through osmosis, and mechanically copied down notes (as cited by Benson, 2000).

355 students in this experiment were placed in bilingual classes for the first five years of primary school, after which they could rejoin the normal stream of students in the Portuguese language school system. For the first three years, students learned almost entirely in their first language. In the 4th year, all lessons switched to Portuguese. Initially, the study was designed to delay this transition until later, in accordance with research on the topic, but it was deemed too slow of a program by the government. As a result, students in year 4 struggled to keep up with the limited and incomplete Portuguese they had learned previously, and were particularly at a loss when taking exams in Portuguese.

PEBIMO students passed from one year to the next at higher rates than control students, sometimes by 30%. Girls in particular benefited from PEBIMO and remained in school at rates 39% higher than the national average. PEBIMO students also displayed far greater student participation, and better relations between students and teachers. Teachers too, reported positive experiences with mother-tongue education, saying that it made communication and transmission of information easier. However, teachers were still often observed lecturing, teaching through rote memorization, and not engaging students as they should have. PEBIMO parents were also happy with MTE and appreciated their children’s education for the benefits it brought them, such as writing letters and reading the bible in local languages. When the experiment was ended, parents protested, and local leaders petitioned for the program to be extended. One failure of
PEBIMO was seen in math scores, which were not good for bilingual students. Additionally, many Mozambicans see Portuguese as necessary to obtain employment, and some elites even want English taught in schools alongside Portuguese, rather than local languages.

**Kenya (Bunyi, 1999)**

In Grace Bunyi’s look at Kenyan language of instruction policies, she finds the roots of today’s current structure in the colonial period. English education arrived in Kenya in 1844, and was initially brought by missionaries who began to learn and study local languages, and who provided most of the early education. The few schools that were built for native Kenyans initially used MTE in the first years of primary school, under the belief that children learned best in their first language. However, Bunyi calls into question the idea that British administrators were adhering to MTE practices out of care for local Kenyans, by pointing out how White settlers needed Kenyans for cheap manual labor, and were incentivized to prevent them from learning English and seeking better jobs in cities or abroad. As a result, Kenyans began to view learning English as a path to power and prestige, or as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o described, “English was the official vehicle and magic formula to colonial elitedom (as quoted in Bunyi, 1999). This perception led to English becoming the primary language of education soon after independence, producing a system that advantaged the elites whose children spoke English, and that punished the rural population with limited access or exposure to English.

Bunyi observed two schools, one whose students were native English speakers and one whose students were Gikuyu speakers. Teachers at the Gikuyu school complained about their students and having to continuously repeat words. These teachers taught through memorization and repetition. There was little student participation or initiative, beyond the bare minimum required by the teacher, and no critical thinking. The inequities that L2 education imposes on
poor, rural, and disconnected children was clear from the interviews and observations at the school where the students’ mother tongue was English. These English-speaking students performed better in class, had higher reading levels, frustrated their teachers significantly less, and were lauded as “very clever” by the instructors.

Bunyi closes by recommending that MTE education be implemented through the first five years of primary school, before transitioning to an L2 system. Importantly, Bunyi raises the possibility of making the L2 language, Kiswahili, which for many students would actually be their first language. Given the disparities and unequal distribution of spoken English in Kenya, Kiswahili, the region’s lingua franca could be a promising alternative to the language of the former colonizer.

Challenges

A common argument against MTE is one of cost. It is expensive to print textbooks, primers, and educational materials in local languages, as opposed to French, English, or Portuguese. This is primarily an issue with demand. When education, government, and print media is all done through European languages, there lacks an audience for mother-tongue materials. With small audiences, print runs must also be small, significantly raising the printing cost per book. One study found that 135,050 French grade 1 textbooks were produced in Senegal, at a unit cost of $0.55; whereas 4,140 Wolof textbooks were printed at a unit cost of $0.55, and only 177 books were written in Fulfulde, at a unit cost of $1.14 (Bunyi, 1999). However, if states were to transition to MTE, they would instantly create a market for L1 books, increasing the print runs significantly, and bringing the prices down. There is nothing cheaper about French or English books other than the fact that they are more numerously printed. MTE, by improving literacy rates among previously illiterate populations, could also improve the
market for local and culturally relevant books, further increasing prints runs for L1 books. While some languages cross multiple borders allowing for multiple states to buy or order books in conjunction, and other languages have millions of speakers, many SSA languages have an extremely limited number of speakers. For these communities, MTE becomes difficult, as print runs will never be high enough to significantly lessen costs. Similarly, finding enough teachers able to communicate in these languages will be a challenge. While MTE is promising, it is must be acknowledged that it is impossible to ensure every student access to schooling in their first language, particularly when so many SSA communities contain multiple languages, that may lack orthographies or a written form. Still by transitioning to widely spoken local languages, ones in which minority students often have some fluency, educational outcomes can be improved.

Another challenges facing MTE policy is the prioritizing of specific local languages over others. In Ghana for example, there are more than 60 languages, with none significantly dominating in terms of speakers. Transitioning to Akan or Dagomba would advantage those ethnic groups over others. English, it is argued is a neutral language that all Ghanaians have equal access to. While there is a danger of favoring certain local languages over others, education in European languages favors elites and divides society based on class differences as opposed to ethnic ones (Romaine, 2002).

Finally, an important question regarding MTE is whether parents want their students learning in local languages. For many, learning English or French is a means of advancement and a mark of education and distinction. Without skills in European languages, students and workers are cut off from paths of advancement and isolated from an increasingly connected and communicating world (social media, it should be noted, has created new space for mother-tongue
communication on the internet). The counter argument of course, is that MTE education actually improves later acquisition of L2 (Bamgbose, 1991), but the perception that teaching in local languages will deprive students of future opportunities is an important one to consider.

**Conclusion**

The imposition of European languages as the means of education and instruction has robbed SSA states of the means to best educate their students. There are many challenges and problems in the region’s schools, but using a European language as the language of instruction in primary schools is a clear impediment to learning. Whether in Mozambique, Cameroon, or Kenya, the debate over the use of language in schools is a battle between different classes and ethnic groups and has no simple solution. Still, it is possible to acknowledge the challenges of finding and training teachers, of buying mother-tongue learning materials, or of favoring certain languages over others, while still firmly confident that evidence and experience support the argument for MTE. Across the continent, teachers stand in front of classrooms lecturing unengaged and silent students. A teacher in Mozambique follows his explanation with “Entendem?”, in Sierra Leone one asks “Are we together?”, in Burkina Faso one asks “On a bien compris?” Unanimously, without pause or actual consideration, students respond with “Sim”, “Yes”, “Oui.” This is not how children, or a continent, can learn. By transitioning to MTE, educators, students, and parents will have the chance to participate and shape education so that it better matches their culture and community. Access to good education—children staying in school, engaged and participating students, better learning outcomes—are a fundamental human right, and mother-tongue education is a crucial means to achieving this right.
Reference List


