

## MOTHER TONGUE INSTRUCTIONS AS A HUMAN RIGHT: A STUDY OF THE MERITS AND DEMERITS OF MOTHER TONGUE INSTRUCTION IN POST-INDEPENDENCE NAMIBIAN SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

*The paper aimed to study the challenges as well as the potential benefits associated with using African languages as the main medium of instruction in Namibian schools. Of all the problems we face in African education today, the most nettlesome appears to be the question of language of instruction. In concrete terms, it boils down to the option between a colonially introduced language and a local language, preferably the mother-tongue. (Prah, 2008, p.1). Research indicates that there is more to gain in promoting African languages in all aspects of education and governance than the opposite. Countries that place greater emphasis on mother tongue instructions continue to thrive socially and economically. Countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam are some of the Asian countries who were once dominated by Europeans who opted to invest in their languages and are thriving economically. The results of the research can be summed up as follows: the sole use of the English language as the main medium of instruction in schools is the reason for high failure rates in grade 10 and 12 final examinations. Due to a lack of enthusiasm from the government regarding the use of indigenous African languages as medium of instruction, many teachers and students alike still prefer English to be the main medium of instruction in schools at the expense of their languages. In conclusion, the government should revise its education policy on language instruction and put more emphasis on the need to robustly use indigenous African languages with English in all schools.*

*Keywords: Mother tongue, medium of instructions, education, indigenous African languages.*

### 1. Introduction

Namibia like other African countries lacks a clear-cut policy on language rights, promotion and protection. The country is home to dozens of languages (both indigenous and colonial). Oshiwambo is the most widely spoken native language in the country. Afrikaans, an Indo-European language based on Dutch is often primarily regarded as the Lingua Franca of the country despite being marginally spoken and understood in the north and north-eastern parts of the country. (Harris, 2015. pp.1-6)

Grimes (1996) states that there is no agreement on how many languages are spoken in Africa. Ethnologists claim that more than 2011 languages are spoken in Africa. Lodhi states that 2583 languages and 1382 dialects are spoken in Africa. (Lodhi, 1993, pp.79-86)

Like elsewhere in Africa, continental indigenous languages have been largely marginalised by

respective governments in favour of inherited colonial languages. In the case of Namibia, the then liberation movement Southwest Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), regarded it as necessary to choose one and only official language for a future independent Namibia. (Maho, 1998, p.5).

Prah (2002) describes the importance of language as follows:

Language is the central feature of any culture. It relates to all areas of the social, economic, and political lives of the people. It is in language that the genius of people is ultimately registered in both the individual and collective expression of people and societies. It is in the language of the masses that social transformation in its most far-reaching sense makes an impact.

A society cannot develop if language is the monopoly of a small and restricted minority whose orientation is directed outside, towards cultures that have had an imperial or colonial relationship with the society that is endeavouring to develop. Education for the masses must be done in the languages of the masses so that development becomes a mass phenomenon, which is part of mass culture. Only then will development translate relevantly in the lives of the broad and major sections of the population. It is my view that language is the key to the challenge of African development. (Prah, *ibid*).

## 2. Literature Review

The use of national languages in education and all aspects of governance is a critical factor in the promotion of democracy, good citizenship, effective decentralisation and training of local officers and elected representatives. (Alidou, 2011). A lot has been written on the importance of mother tongue instruction in African schools. To this effect, many studies have demonstrated that there is a strong and positive correlation between literacy in the native language and learning English (New York State Education Department, 2000; Clay, 1993). The medium of instruction is indeed a crucial issue in language education policy in multilingual post-colonial countries such as Namibia. (Norro, 2021). Teachers occupy a central role in language policy implementation, and their beliefs affect it. It is therefore important to study their beliefs about language education policy and its implementation. (Norro, 2021). Lack of proficiency in the medium of instruction (Moi) for both learners and teachers is an important factor in any education system. (Tibategeza, E.R, du Plessis, 2018). Qorro (2005) correctly argues, "[a]s the discussion of the decision of quality education cannot be divorced from goals of education, it is equally important not to divorce the question of medium of instruction from quality education" (p. 115).

In the case of Namibia, English was chosen not only to serve as the country's sole official language but also as the main medium of instruction in Namibian schools. However, the choice of English as a medium of instruction has attracted both criticism and support. This regard, Norro (2021) posits that despite the official policy, mother-tongue instruction is not implemented in all schools. The EMIS statistics from 2019 show that 58 900 of a total 241 274 learners in grades 1–3, or 24.1%, were enrolled in English-medium schools:

The Ministry's language policy encourages mother-tongue education in Grades 1–3. A different medium of instruction—typically English—can be used if the parents recommend it. Increasing numbers of learners from different mother-tongue settlements (especially in urban areas) and the lack of teachers of different languages are two of the factors

contributing to the increasing use of English as the medium of instruction—a deviation from the language policy. The increasing enrolment in private schools which use English as a medium of instruction in junior primary seems also to suggest that considerable number of parents prefer English as a medium of instruction. This might also be an indication that parents do not understand the objectives of mother-tongue instruction in those grades. (MoEAC 2019, 25)

On the other hand, Tötemeyer (2010) also expresses strong criticism of the way English has been used as a medium of instruction in ways that flout the 2003 policy. “Some principals still believe that they have the right to decide which African/ indigenous/local languages shall be taught or not taught in their schools, or even to decide that no African language shall be taught. This assumed freedom to discriminate against some or all African languages, even when they are being spoken in the immediate vicinity, is not stipulated anywhere” (Tötemeyer, 2010, p. 10).

Norro (2021) further argues that the implementation of mother tongue instruction (Mol) is not properly spelt out in Namibia. This is an academic gap. The Mol is the mother tongue/home language or a predominant local language (NIED 2016, 29). In senior primary (grades 4–7) and the secondary phase (grades 8–12), the Mol is English. According to the 2011 census, however, only 3.4% of the population speaks English as L1. This is another gap that requires further study.

### 3. Research Methods

The study employed qualitative secondary analysis to arrive at the conclusion. According to Greenwood (2020) Qualitative Secondary Analysis (QSA) is when previously gathered data are reanalysed. This can be conducted by the same researcher(s), or by other researcher(s) who have access to the dataset. Researchers will use datasets to explore new questions that were not considered in the initial project, or to apply different analytical approaches, strategies, or frameworks which were not part of the initial analysis.

In recent years qualitative secondary analysis has become crucial in research. In this regard, Hinds et al (1997) posit that for research involving quantitative data, Secondary Data Analysis (SDA), and the process of sharing data for SDA, has become commonplace.

Hinds et al. (1997) further argue that it is a “respected, common, and cost-effective approach to maximizing the usefulness of collected data” (p. 408). They describe four approaches to SDA: (1) research where SDA focuses on a different unit of analysis from that of the parent study; (2) research involving a more in-depth analysis of themes from the parent study with a subset of data from that study; (3) analyses of data from the parent study that appear important, but not sufficiently focused on in the primary analysis; and (4) analyses with a dataset that includes data from a parent study and newly-collected data that refines the parent study’s purpose or research questions (Hinds et al., 1997).

Using the qualitative secondary analysis, the following documents were analysed to reach the conclusion and recommendations for this study:

1. The 1981 Namibia Language Policy.
2. Language Policy for Schools in Namibia 1992.
3. Language Policy for Schools in Namibia 2003.
4. Theses and other academic writings on the subject matter.
5. The Constitution of Namibia
6. Newspaper articles on the subject matter.

#### **4. Results**

Research from other countries indicates that the Namibian approach to mother tongue instruction has not necessarily yielded positive results. In this instance, research by Macdonald (1990) has shown that students who were switched from their first language medium (four years of Setswana medium) to English medium at the beginning of year five were not able to cope with the linguistic requirements of the system at that point.

(1) The study shows a dramatic rise in drop-outs from repeaters in the system by the end of year five.

(2) Four years of mother-tongue education are therefore not enough.

(3) Four years of learning a second language for use as a medium are not enough (for example, by the end of year four, learners had exposure to 800 words in English, but they needed 7,000 to cope with the curriculum in year five).

On the other hand, many authors have argued that 8 years or more of mother tongue instruction can be beneficial to a student. On this score, research by Heugh (2002, 2003) has shown that:

(1) Eight years of mother-tongue education in South African schools (1955-75) resulted in increasing pass rates for African language-speaking learners at the final exit point (year 12).

(2) After a reduction to four years of mother-tongue education from 1976 onwards, the pass rate at year 12 fell from 83.7 per cent in 1976 to 44 per cent in 1992.

(3) The education achievement of African pupils increased during the period of eight years of mother-tongue education despite the poor resourcing of schools and significantly unequal expenditure between white and black children.

In addition, the lack of political will to promote African languages on the part of the ruling elites continues to hamper the development of African languages. As it stands, the Namibian parliament is yet to endorse a new language policy for schools. The said policy is aimed at recognising all of Namibia's non-recognised languages as well as enhancing existing ones.

Research also indicates that the two institutions of higher learning, that is, the University of Namibia (UNAM) and the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) have made an effort to promote and protect indigenous languages. UNAM has a language centre and a language journal that allows authors to submit their works in local native African languages. NUST also has a journal on languages and is embarking on several projects sponsored by the European Union to document and develop orthographies for local indigenous languages.

#### **5. Discussion**

As alluded to above, Namibia is a small country but rich when it comes to linguistic diversity. Over 20 languages and dialects are spoken in the country.

**Table 1. Dominant home languages in Namibia, percentage households**

Language	1991	2001	2011
Oshiwambo	50.6	48.5	48.9
Khoekhoegowab	12.4	11.5	11.3
Afrikaans	9.5	11.4	10.4
Rukavango	10	10	8.5
Otjiherero	8	7.9	8.6
English	0.8	1.9	3.4

**Source: Namibia Statistics Agency 2003, 2012**

### 5.1 The Namibian Language Policy

After a bitter 25-year war of national emancipation, Namibia became an independent state on 21 March 1990. (Cluver, 1992, pp-117). About thirty languages (30) according to some estimates are spoken in Namibia. Under apartheid, it was generally assumed that none of these indigenous languages was not spoken or understood widely enough to be viable options for consideration as national or official languages. (Cluver, *ibid*)

### 5.2 The National (“SWAPO”) language Policy

The ruling SWAPO party identified Afrikaans as the language of oppression and English as the language of liberation and the population was mobilised to switch to English. Language thus became an integral part of the struggle against the South African rule in Namibia.

SWAPO had proposed English as the choice of official language during the 1970s, but the language policy was not formally established until 1981, when SWAPO and UNIN published a document called *Toward a language policy for Namibia: English as the official language*.

### 5.3 Defining the term: Mother Tongue

A mother tongue is the first language that a child acquires and uses at home before attending school. UNESCO (1953) cautions that a mother tongue need not necessarily be the language, which a child’s parents use. In mother tongue education, it is a language that a person has acquired in early years and which normally has become his or her natural instrument of thought and communication. (Kobia, 2007. pp.101-119).

Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) suggests four criteria in defining mother tongue. These are summed up as follows:

Origin – the language(s) one learned first.

Competence - the language(s) one knows best.

Function - the language(s) one uses most.

Identification (a). Internal - the language(s) one identifies with. (b). External - the language(s) one is identified as a native speaker of by others.

In the case of Namibia and according to the National Curriculum for Basic Education (NIED 2016) uses the terms “mother tongue” and “home language” interchangeably to refer to the languages that are integral to one’s identity and culture.

### 5.4 The debate pertaining to Mother Tongue instruction in Namibia

Chavez (2016) narrates that when Namibia became independent, the Ministry of Education and Culture felt that it was necessary to formulate a new language policy for schools. This policy was detailed in a document entitled “The language policy for schools: 1992-1996 and beyond” (MEC, 1993). This policy instructed that students should be taught primarily in their

home language in Grades 1-3, with further instruction in these languages being provided throughout their formal education; additionally, English was to be a compulsory subject starting in Grade 1, and then become the main medium of instruction from Grade 4 and onward. (MEC, 1993).

The language policy document for education entitled “Education and Culture in Namibia: The Way Forward to 1996 yielded the following results:

- The fact that for pedagogical reasons it is ideal for learners to study through their mother tongue, particularly in the early years of schooling when basic skills of reading, writing and concept formation are required.
- The need for learners to be proficient enough in English, the official language, at the end of the seven-year primary school cycle in order to gain access to further education as well as to a language of wider communication. (Quoted from the Language Policy for Schools in Namibia. pp.1-5).

### **5.5 Challenges affecting the implementation of mother tongue instruction in Namibia.**

Implementing mother tongue instruction has faced numerous challenges in Namibia. In this regard, Trewby (1999), identifies those challenges:

1. The school might have such a heterogeneous population that the learners speak too many different languages for one to be chosen as the medium of instruction.
2. The authorities and the community may have decided that it would be fairer if all the children were to learn through the medium of another language, i.e. English or Afrikaans, since the other learners might be disadvantaged if the language of the majority was used.
3. There might be no teachers on the staff of the school who could teach that language.
4. There might be no upper primary or secondary schools where the learners could continue to study their language.
5. The instructional materials for the language may not be as good as those for English or Afrikaans.

Raza et al (2015) posits that Mother Tongue education helps students to develop not only the Mother Tongue itself but also their skills in the majority education language and research shows clearly that a second language is learned best when a first language has been learned well. Bilingual students perform better in school when the school teaches the Mother Tongue effectively and, where appropriate, develops literacy in that language. When students develop their abilities in two (or more languages) throughout their education, they gain a deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. They have more practice in processing language, especially when they develop literacy in both. (Raza et al, 2015)

### **5.6 Language rights as covered under various Namibian and international legal frameworks.**

The right to language is expressly stated under the Namibian constitution. For example, article 3 of the Constitution stipulates that:

- (1) The official language of Namibia shall be English.
- (2) Nothing contained in this Constitution shall prohibit the use of any other language as a medium of instruction in private schools or in schools financed or subsidised by the State, subject to compliance with such requirements as may be imposed by law, to ensure proficiency in the official language, or for pedagogic reasons.
- (3) Nothing contained in Sub-Article (1) hereof shall preclude legislation by Parliament which

permits the use of a language other than English for legislative, administrative and judicial purposes in regions or areas where such other language or languages are spoken by a substantial component of the population.

Various international human rights instruments recognise the right to use and be taught in one's mother tongue. For example, The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) declare that Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons" (Art. 13.1).

In addition, Art. 14 (1 and 2) states:

- "1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning"; and
- "2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination".

Whereas article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) states that measures should be taken to "ensure that education is culturally appropriate for minorities and indigenous peoples, and of good quality for all."

### **5.7 Arguments in favour of mother-tongue education**

- Research shows that children can best learn a subject matter when the content is conveyed through their mother tongue or the language the learners are most competent in. (Moraes, 1996).p.7).

Kioko (2015) summarises other benefits of teaching young learners in their home language as follows:

- Use of the learner's home language at the start of school also lessens the burden on teachers, especially where the teacher speaks the local language well. Research shows that learning situations where both the teacher and the learner are non-native users of the language of instruction, the teacher struggles as much as the learners, particularly at the start of education.
- By using the learner's home language, learners are more likely to engage in the learning process. The interactive learner-centred approach, recommended by all educationalists thrives in an environment where learners are sufficiently proficient in the language of instruction. It gives learners confidence and helps to affirm their cultural identity.
- When learners start school in a language that is still new to them, it leads to a teacher-centred approach and reinforces passiveness and silence in classrooms. This in turn suppresses young learner's potential and liberty to express themselves freely. It dulls the enthusiasm of young minds, inhibits their creativity, and makes the learning experience unpleasant.

### **5.8 Arguments against the use of African languages in education**

Obanya (1999) summarises what he calls fallacies often employed against the use of African languages in education.

The multiplicity of languages within the borders of most African countries;

- (1) Multi-ethnic populations in urban areas;
- (2) the level of technical development of African languages,
- (3) the official status of indigenous languages in most African countries;
- (4) the hostility of Africans to the study of their own languages;
- (5) lack of personnel and of appropriate materials;
- (6) the high cost of educating in indigenous languages.

### **5.9 Is the English language the reason for the high failure rate of grade 10 and 12 students in Namibia?**

In terms of the Namibian experience, it illustrates that English has contributed to the high failure rate in Namibian schools (because in Namibia you need to pass English to be considered fit for tertiary education). Over 60% of pupils in Namibia fail to attain B symbols in national exams. The Namibian education system has since independence favoured English over indigenous languages. (Kaundu Alloys. "A Language that Alienates". Namibian Newspaper. 23 March 2017).

According to Harris (2011) after the reform of the education system in 1993 when the apartheid era Bantu Education was phased out, the results of the first public examinations for Grade 10 were devastating. The examination was administered by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and written in English. Only 15% of learners who sat for the Cambridge O Levels (Grade 10) examinations passed during that year (1993).

Harris (2011) further submits that following these poor results so soon after independence, literacy and numeracy skills levels were tested among Grade 8 learners in Windhoek; it was found that 22.4% of learners were not functionally literate in English and only marginally skilled at Grade 6 level. Further, 49.2% of learners had numeracy skills lower than Grade 7 level. She further argues that it is a fact that learners who did not achieve the required literacy or numeracy level for Grade 8 came from schools where English and not the home language was chosen as the medium of instruction. (See also Jones, 1996, pp. 280-290).

Namibia continues to see high failure rates in both its junior and grade 12 end-of-year qualifying exams. Namibia's Junior Secondary Certificate results have remained consistently poor for many years, with thousands of full-time students either ending up on the streets or



enrolling with the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL), while a handful are allowed to repeat full-time at Namibian schools. In 2015, more than 17,000 grade 10 students failed their end-of-year exams. (Staff reporter "More than 17 000 full-time learners fail Grade 10". 17 December 2015). The Namibian Sun. Reasons for such failure are multifaceted, however, some experts argue that the poor command of the English language by learners plays a significant role in this regard.

On the issue of high failure rates among grade 10 learners, Diescho blames poor command of the English language. He opines:

Throughout the years, there have been numerous studies performed, some dating back to the early 90's, all of which produced the same finding, namely: English proficiency in Namibia is poor. We know this. Yet the situation remains the same, despite the findings and recommendations. Incompetency in the business language and the language of teaching and instruction can only have dire consequences on the learner's ability to comprehend what they are learning, consequently resulting in dismal academic results." (Joseph Diescho. Diescho's Dictum: Poor English a cause of high failure in Namibian schools. (10 February 2015. New Era).

This state of affairs is compounded by the fact that 98% of Namibian teachers in public schools are not fluent in English. The worrying percentage is a result of the findings from the English Language Proficiency Test which teachers wrote and based on the 1999 English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP) developed by external consultants from the University of Warwick, United Kingdom. (Steven Mvula. "English Proficiency test for teachers ill-conceived". The Economist. 18 November 2011)

The damning report from the Ministry of Education found that more than 70 percent of teachers in the senior secondary phase cannot read and write basic English, while 63 per cent in the junior secondary phase are not sufficiently proficient in English. (Denver Kisting. "98% of teachers not fluent in English". The Namibian newspaper. 09-11-2011.). Moreover, the same report indicates that there is strong evidence that this low performance of teachers and other educators overall has a negative impact on learners' performance in English and all other subjects. (Anonymous. "Don't blame the teachers, blame the system. Informante. 16 November 2011. )

## **6. Conclusions and recommendations**

From what one can deduce from this article; the English language continues to be regarded as a suitable medium of instruction in all educational settings in Namibia. It is also safe to say that the high failure rates in both grade 10 and 12 results is partially blamed on the use of English as a medium of instruction. There is no political will to develop indigenous African languages. Even if such will was there, the cost of producing educational materials in all indigenous languages remains relatively high. There are about nine (9) nationally recognised languages in Namibia that will require material development hence the said costs.

The benefits of using indigenous languages as medium of instruction in schools far outweigh the disadvantages. In this light, the government through the Ministry of Education must ensure that local languages are promoted, protected and developed to the same standards

as the English language. To achieve this, political will is required. Africa as a whole can learn from their Asian counterparts, who upon independence from Europe, developed their own languages instead of adopting those of their colonial masters. More than fifty years later, Asian countries have become some of the most technologically advanced nations on earth. Their economies are vibrant and in some instances better than those of European nations who colonised them. Did Asian nations achieve all of this using English, French, Portuguese and Spanish? The answer is of course no. Africa has been using languages of their former colonial masters for the past 50 years and we remain the poorest continent. What does this say about our preoccupation with European languages?

Africa in general and Namibia in particular must invest in the development of African languages. African languages are not only markers of cultural identity but also are capable of fomenting national pride. African leaders should use African languages in all settings to instil pride in young people. In the case of Namibia, the government should enact a specific law promoting and protecting all of the country's indigenous languages. As it stands, Namibia only has several policies to this effect. A language regulatory body, moulded in the form of South Africa's PanSlab and Tanzania's Bakita should also be considered by the Namibian government.

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*Language Policy for Schools in Namibia.*

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