



2006/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/75

Background paper* prepared for the
Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006

Literacy for Life

Mother tongue literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa

Adama Ouane and Christine Glanz
2005

This paper was commissioned by the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* as background information to assist in drafting the 2006 report. It has not been edited by the team. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* or to UNESCO. The papers can be cited with the following reference: "Paper commissioned for the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, Literacy for Life*". For further information, please contact efareport@unesco.org

* Commissioned through the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE)

MOTHER TONGUE LITERACY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The following contribution is based on the preliminary results of an ongoing stocktaking desk research by ADEA (Association for the Development of Education in Africa) and the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE) on the use of different approaches to mother tongue and bilingual education in Sub-Saharan Africa. The use of a foreign international language as official language is a dominant feature in most African countries irrespective of their true linguistic configuration whether exceptionally “monolingual” or predominantly multilingual in the rest of the cases. The studies reviewed suggest that (i) bilingual education is best achieved when it is based on literacy in a language familiar to the learner, (ii) informal language acquisition in prevailing multilingual context in Africa creates a completely different set-up and conducive factor yet to be used and nurtured, (iii) almost all prevailing models of bilingual education existing in Africa are ultimately “early exit model” preparing ground for the transition to the official languages and all condemned to fail as, contrary to the maintenance bilingualism, there is no real transfer of learning secured and taking place, (iv) there is a body of research evidence to support mother tongue literacy and education and to dispel the confusions and myths dominating the field.

1. Literacy and Language(s)

Literacy is not something which is to be delivered but something to be employed for learners in order to explore their own language and the world on their own terms, which allow them to create and engage in the diverse worlds of literacy.

Although literacy is different from language it exists and is acquired only in a given language. Literacy acquisition is language acquisition but literacy is not necessary language learning. Language learning is different from learning through a language. This distinction is critically important in mother tongue education and bilingual education. It is problematized in the distinction between language of instruction (LoI) and languages as a subject matter.

It is now largely admitted that literacy learning must reflect the specific and diverse contexts of acquisition and use of literacy. These include (1) what the learner already knows, wants and brings to the learning experience, (2) the mother tongue of the learner, (3) the cultural background of the learner, including family, culture, local culture, oral traditions, and indigenous knowledge of the learners and their relation to the literacy being acquired, and (4) the identity of the learner in relation to gender, class, religion, and race.

In order to contextualize literacy, diverse forms of provision need to be established in relation to the languages used, the content of programmes, the materials to be produced

and the types of 'textual community the learners are belonging' to or the messages referred to and through which their meaning is rendered explicit.

Thus, we must acknowledge the fact of multiliteracies, literacies appropriate to the local as well as national and international contexts. Literacy in Tanzania has been successful in reaching a large proportion of the population and contributed to reinforcing national cohesion. Yet by crushing, overriding or ignoring the hundreds of minority languages these speech communities are deprived from exploring and valuing their immediate world of socialisation and communication. Their languages are reduced to a stepping stone for literacy in the official language only. These communities are, therefore, neither rooted in their local nor in the national literacy and feel a gap in their self-confidence.

2. Limits of Current Approaches to Literacy in Multilingual Settings

The question of access to and use of literacy in which languages and for what purpose and under what circumstances is widely discussed. This particular aspect is very pronounced in multilingual and multicultural settings and in hitherto predominantly oral societies. There is often a linguistic gap between the language(s) of the community and the language(s) of instruction. The imposition of foreign languages for written communication within the systems of education and administration creates unnecessary barriers to the participation of a large part, often a majority, of the population (Bangbose, 2000, Ouane 2003).

There is a large body of research to show that the development of personal and social literacy is greatly impeded by the fact that literacy is promoted in an official language that is seldom spoken and even less frequently written, thereby excluding a large proportion of the population from participation in literacy-based social activities and decision-making processes (Fagerberg-Diallo 2001, López 2001, Prah 2001). On the other hand, an indigenous writing system as in Pulaar (one of the most widely used African languages) can forge reactive and unifying cultural cement in contrast with French, the official language in Senegal (Fagerberg-Diallo 2001). Literate practices are closely tied up with linguistic, social, and cultural codes.

The domination and imposition of literate practices is not created only by contact with a foreign, colonial language. Even within national boundaries, within sub national entities and local communities themselves, similar problems of assimilating and interpreting literate practices occur. In all these complex linguistic ecologies, literacy acquisition requires people to overcome and domesticate the existing layers of social practice and sometimes requires members of these communities to learn multiple languages and literacies (Ouane 1995, Jung & Ouane 2001).

The problem, much examined in this stocktaking exercise, is accommodating two sets of concerns, also highlighted in an earlier study by UIE and DSE (German Foundation of International Development) on the making of literate societies (Olson and Torrance, 2001), namely the need to acknowledge existing language, knowledge, practices, and organizations in a society and the need, at least for some aspects of social development,

to develop highly literate national institutions and the competence to fully participate in them.

Consequently, it is important to acknowledge the role of indigenous language, knowledge, and social organization in the acquisition of literacy. Literacy training in the language of the nation-state is often literacy in a second language in which learners have no competence; it advances a conception of knowledge which is out of step with traditional knowledge; and it assumes rules of power and authority discrepant from local understanding. Such training condemns a majority of children to failure. (Heugh, 2005, Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2005, Brock-Utne & Alidou 2005)

Rather than simply eradicating local knowledge or overwriting it with the official knowledge of the dominant society, it must be acknowledged and employed as the basis of all further learning and development (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996).

One implication of this stocktaking exercise is the importances of first acquiring literacy in one's own language even if one is to subsequently acquire literacy also in a national standard language.

Additional insight into learning is provided by considering how adults learn (and fail to learn) to read and write. The mass literacy campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s that directly attempted to transplant literate skills, often in a foreign language, to members of an essentially oral culture, are now judged to have been largely a failure (Bhola, 1984, Triebel, 2001). They failed, presumably, because there was no reason to learn; literacy provided access neither to knowledge, literature, power, nor employment. Furthermore, literacy training did not involve the creation of relevant social institutions as part of government, economics, science, which embed literacy in their communication practices. On the other hand, adult literacy programmes tended to succeed when they exploited an indigenous language (Alidou, 2003, Fagerberg-Diallo, 2001), when the literacy being acquired had some functional role in the community (Doronila, 1996), and when becoming a reader provided the learner with a new identity, namely, "one who reads" (Fagerberg-Diallo, 2001).

One reason, literacy campaigns often have failed is that they have been carried out without proper regard to the language and learning needs of the communities concerned. Literacy programmes advocating the use of one single "official" language in multilingual environments have so far produced little result, often at high cost. Research has consistently shown that learning to read and write in the mother tongue facilitates access to another written language (Goody, 2001, Heugh 2002, 2003, Brock-Utne 2000, Ouane 2003, Grin 2005, Reh, 1981, Geva & Ryan 1993).

3. Gains of Mother Tongue Literacy in Multilingual Contexts

Every society has, by definition, some social organization, some rules and traditions for the management of knowledge and power which are the centres of social negotiation. Insofar literacy is central to the extent that it can make explicit, manageable, and achievable the goals and purposes of those social institutions.

Literacy in several languages in a multilingual environment allows for highly profitable forms of transfer: (1) the transfer of elaborate linguistic skills and forms from one language to another; (2) the transfer of writing skills from one language to another; (3) a transfer of local knowledge to wider contexts where it can be profitably applied. The maintenance of education systems which systematically exclude the use of the majority's vernacular languages can no longer be justified by political leaders (Elwert, 2001, Wolff 2004).

Cognitive advantages of literacy education in a mother tongue

Learners who first learn reading and writing in their mother tongue have a better command of a foreign language in its written and oral mode.

Developing bilingualism and biliteracy is an asset to learners as it enhances their cognitive performance and metalinguistic abilities as well as a general more flexible intellectual orientation. In monolingual schools normal linguistic behaviours for multilingual contexts such as code-switching is stigmatised and discouraged although it increases cognitive flexibility.

Psychological advantages of mother tongue and bilingual education

Social stigmatisation and discrimination of languages effects literacy education negatively. It results in resistance by learners and their community. Signs of resistance can be high illiteracy rates due to low attendance rates, high drop out rates, high repetition rates, low performance in exams, low communal support.

The mother tongue and the respective culture are key sources of identification and self confidence. Through the use of mother tongue and bilingual literacy education as well as culturally adapted curricula in schools, the knowledge and communicative practices of the individual's community are valued. Literacy education expands under such conditions an individual's communicative repertoire, thus, the learner's possibilities to shape and participate in social interaction.

Literacy education is successful in a positive learning atmosphere in which learners and teachers feel comfortable with the overall language use. A positive atmosphere is according to brain research a prerequisite for learning. Success in learning enhances self-esteem and motivation to attend school. Stress and anxiety are detrimental to learning and research shows that teachers draw faster on coercive measures when they teach in less familiar languages.

Pedagogical advantages of mother tongue and bilingual education

Literacy education in Africa often suffers from serious communication problems between teachers and pupils. In classes with a foreign medium of instruction teachers often face language difficulties themselves and pupils do not have the language competence to understand what the teacher says. Due to these uncertainties with respect to comprehension and expression, oral and written communicative exchange is reduced to “safe talk” (rote learning, repetition etc.), that is, active learning is not taking place.

Literacy acquisition is language acquisition. High level literacy and language acquisition takes many years and requires continuous training. Competences in reading and writing rise considerably in effective bilingual literacy education programmes where literacy education is given special and long term attention (in the case of the Zambian Primary Reading Programme even up to 780%, see Williams, 1998).

Literacy education curricula need to integrate locally relevant literacy practices in the languages to which learners are exposed in their environment and which they can use throughout. This is a way to implement the educational principle of valuing and building on prior learning.

Literacy education based on locally relevant curricula allows for local production of reading materials. Furthermore, the production of teaching material in mother tongues is a valuable resource for the development of contextually appropriate teaching material for foreign language teaching (the usual practice in Africa is vice versa).

What about the costs?

Conflicts prevail around the choice of languages for literacy and education relative to the cultural costs involved. What then are the merits and demerits of using small local languages as vehicles for advancing literacy and education (Coulmas, 2001, Goody, 2001).

Some (Coulmas, 2001) argue that giving up social and especially cultural pride is one of the "costs" of literacy. Learning to be literate in a second, international language often at the expense of an indigenous vernacular language is one of the high stakes involved in building a literate society in dense multilingual settings. On the opposite, Heugh (2005) insists in this stocktaking that local, indigenous languages are relevant and sustainable by themselves and that it is inappropriate, damaging and costly to ignore them for the sake of economy of scale (see also Grin 2005).

What is required is recognition of multilayered communication in different languages analogous to the multicode handling of a specific language for different social, cultural, and occupational purposes.

The most positive and constructive policy recommendation stemming from this review is based on principles of inclusivity and integration, valuing both the identity formation provided by local languages and at the same time participation in mainstream literate practices. These are the alternatives to separation and ghettoization. This implies creating an environment in which the learner knows and reads his or her own text, and writes about his or her own experience as well as those of others, thus allowing people to recognize their own mother tongue as a language of identity, thought, and instruction (Maas, 2001). Such an approach offers an alternative to the now common barriers that block cultural and linguistic continuity, and that increasingly push minorities into a separate, artificial existence (Prah, 2001). If literacy should transcend local language, it should at the same time start with and in local languages.

Fagerberg-Diallo (2001) shows how the availability of attractive reading materials contributes to increasing the demand for literacy courses and for access to materials that are seen as linguistically and culturally embedded and locally relevant. Small investments to support the emergence of a local publishing industry could contribute importantly to both the formal education sector and individual development.

References

- Alidou, H. 2003. Medium of Instruction in Postcolonial Africa. In: Tollefson, J. and Tsui, A. (eds.). *Medium of Instruction Policies: Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Publishers.
- Alidou H. and B. Brock-Utne 2005. Teaching Practices – Teaching in a Familiar Language. Draft chapter for a report Optimising Learning and Education in Africa: the Language Factor commissioned by ADEA, GTZ, Commonwealth Secretariat.
- Brock-Utne, Birgit 2000. *Whose Education for All? The Recolonization of the African Mind*. New York/London: Falmer Press.
- Brock-Utne, B. and Alidou H. 2005. Active Students – Learning Through a Language They Master. Draft chapter for a report Optimising Learning and Education in Africa: the Language Factor commissioned by ADEA, GTZ, Commonwealth Secretariat.
- Bamgbose, A. 2000. *Language and Exclusion: The consequences of language policies in Africa*. Münster, Hamburg & London: Lit Verlag.
- Bhola, H. S. 1984. *Campaigning for Literacy: Eight national experiences of the twentieth century with a memorandum to decision-makers*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Coulmas, F. 2001. Literacy in Japan: Kanji, Kana, Romaji, and Bits. In: D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds.) 2001. *The Making of Literate Societies*. Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 101 – 120.
- Canieso-Doronila, Maria Luisa 1996. *Landscapes of Literacy: an ethnographic study of functional literacy in marginal Philippine communities*. Hamburg, London: UNESCO Institute for Education.
- Elwert, G. 2001. Societal Literacy: writing culture and development. In: D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds.) 2001. *The Making of Literate Societies*. Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 54 – 67.
- Fagerberg-Diallo, S. 2001. Constructive Interdependence: The response of a Senegalese community to the question of why become literate. In: D. R. Olson and N. Torrance

- (eds.) 2001. *The Making of Literate Societies*. Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 153 – 177.
- Geva, E. & E. B. Ryan 1993. Linguistic and Memory Correlates of Academic Skills in First and Second Languages. *Language Learning* 43: 5-42.
- Goody, E. and J. Bennett 2001. Literacy for Gonja and Birifor Children in Northern Ghana. In: D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds.) 2001. *The Making of Literate Societies*. Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 178 – 200.
- Grin, F. 2005. The Economics of Language Policy Implementation: Identifying and Measuring Costs. In: *Mother tongue-based bilingual education in Southern Africa: the dynamics of implementation*. Proceedings of a symposium held at the University of Cape Town, 16-19 October 2003, ed. by Neville Alexander. Cape Town: Volkswagen Foundation & PRAESA.
- Heugh, K. 2005. Language Education Models in Africa: research, design, decision-making, outcomes and costs Draft chapter for a report Optimising Learning and Education in Africa: the Language Factor commissioned by ADEA, GTZ, Commonwealth Secretariat.
- Heugh, K. 2003. A re-take on bilingual education in and for South Africa. In: *Multilingualism in Global and Local Perspectives*. Selected papers from the 8th Nordic Conference on bilingualism, November 1-3, 2001. K. Fraurud, and K. Hyltenstam (eds.), Stockholm: Centre for Research on Bilingualism, Stockholm University and Rinkeby Institute of Multilingual Research. Pp. 47 - 62.
- Heugh K. 2002. A History of Mother Tongue and Bilingual Education in SA. In: Beckett, T. (ed). *Reports on Mother-Tongue Education: Proceedings of the Mother-tongue education with special reference to South Africa and Belgium*. International Workshop, 14-15 May 2001, University of Cape Town. Cape Town: University of Antwerp-PRAESA.
- Jung, I. & Ouane, A. 2001. Literacy and Social Development: Policy and Implementation. In: D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds.) 2001. *The Making of Literate Societies*. Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 319 – 336.
- López, L. E. 2001. Literacy and Intercultural Bilingual Education in the Andes. In: D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds.) 2001. *The Making of Literate Societies*. Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 201 – 224.
- Maas, L. 2001. Literacy in Germany. In: D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds.) 2001. *The Making of Literate Societies*. Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 82 – 100.
- Olson, D. R. and N. Torrance 2001. Conceptualising Literacy as a Personal Skill and as a Social Practice. In: D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds.) 2001. *The Making of Literate Societies*. Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 3 – 18.
- Ouane, A. (ed.) 2003. *Towards a multilingual culture of education*. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Education.
- Ouane, A. (ed.) 1995. *Vers une culture multilingue de l'éducation*. (UNESCO Institute for Education Study no. 3). Hamburg: UNESCO.
- Reh, M. 1981. Sprache und Gesellschaft. In: B. Heine, T. Schadeberg and E. Wolff (eds.). *Die Sprachen Afrikas*. Hamburg: Buske.
- Prah, K. K. 2001. Language, Literacy, the Production and Reproduction of Knowledge, and the Challenge of African Development. In: D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds.) 2001. *The Making of Literate Societies*. Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 123 – 141.
- Prinsloo, M. and M. Breier (eds.) 1996. *The Social Uses of Literacy: theory and practice in contemporary South Africa*. Bertsham, South Africa; Amsterdam, Netherlands; Sached Books; Benjamins.
- Triebel, A. 2001. The Roles of Literacy Practices in the Activities of Institutions of Developed and Developing Countries. In: D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds.) 2001. *The Making of Literate Societies*. Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

- Williams, E. 1998. *Investigating Bilingual Literacy: Evidence from Malawi and Zambia*. London: DFID.
- Wolff, H. E. 2004. Marketing Multilingual Education in Africa: With Special Reference to Bilingual Approaches to Basic Education in Niger (Francophone West Africa). In: J. F. Pfaffe (ed.) 2004. *Making multilingual education a reality for all. Operationalizing good intentions*. Proceedings of the joint Third International Conference of the Association for the Development of African Languages in Education, Science and Technology (ADALEST) and the Fifth Malawian National Language Symposium, Mangochi, Malawi, 30 August - 03 September 2004. Zomba: University of Malawi Centre For Language Studies, gtz German Technical Cooperation. Pp. 124 – 165.