Topic A: Importance of First Language Medium of Instruction

The medium of instruction refers to the language that is used to teach the content. It is not the content itself: math, history, science, music, or even another language, but the language used to convey it. The medium of instruction is almost always standard across given school districts and is the dominant language of the country. However, many countries have many languages spoken in them. Two extreme examples of this in the Commonwealth are India with 19 official languages and hundreds more common but unofficial languages and South Africa with 11 official languages. Children who speak these languages are often not effectively served by school systems. This is a problem in almost if not all Commonwealth countries, which, because of complicated colonial histories, have complex relationships with the dominance of English over a variety of native languages. There are over 800 native languages spoken in Papua New Guinea alone, none of which are English, yet English is the most common medium of instruction. Even in India with 19 official languages, the 2001 census identified 26 languages each with over 1 million native speakers that don’t have official status. These languages are not used in schools. In Canada, a country with both a French and English colonial past, those language are well represented in Education, but the vast numbers of Native languages are underrepresented.

---

Having a first language medium of instruction confers large numbers of benefits on students when compared to those who don’t have their first language as the medium of instruction. Students who are taught in their first language are able to work with vocabulary they already know. Because of this, they are much more likely to understand what they are being taught, and they likely feel comfortable in the classroom. Learning to read is one of the first steps in primary education, and proper reading skills like recognizing the sounds associated with letters or characters and learning the meanings of words can only be accomplished in a language that children already know how to speak. Furthermore, instruction in a first language gives students language skills to function in the classroom and out of the classroom. This is important for building confidence, which helps with self-esteem and leads to important lifelong skills like initiative and creativity.

On the other hand, instruction in a second language, which is different than learning a second language, is associated with serious risks. All of the explained benefits like comfort in using a language and self-confidence are lost. Students who are instructed in a second language usually don’t understand what they are being taught. They don’t develop foundational literacy skills in their first language and they are then unable to use those skills in any other languages. This leads to serious frustration and often repeated failures of grades. Students who learn in a second language drop out of school more frequently than students who learn in their first language.

There are of course a number of difficulties in starting mother tongue education. The United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization summarized them as such: language choice when there is a diversity of first languages, the length of instruction in a first language, organizing non-

---

8 Ibid, 4.
9 Ibid, 18.
10 Ibid, 18.
standardized languages, and preparing teachers to teach in those languages.\textsuperscript{11} For countries in the Commonwealth, it is not as simple as replacing English as the medium of instruction with the native language, as almost all countries have large numbers of ethnic groups each with their own languages.

To take one example, the only official language of Nigeria is English, and it is therefore the language of education, but native languages such as Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Kanuri, Tiv and Ibibio all have millions of native speakers.\textsuperscript{12} A more decentralized school system would be needed to accommodate this diversity. There is also no easy answer for the length of instruction in a first language. Most research indicates that six years of instruction in a mother tongue is necessary for developing cognition and understanding of a language.\textsuperscript{13} However, there is debate on when to introduce a second language and how much time to spend learning that language or learning other material in that language. Many of the languages spoken by some of the most vulnerable communities around the world have not been formalized with written alphabets.\textsuperscript{14} There remains an enormous challenge to standardizing those languages to be used in formal education, but doing so would be a huge step for integrating those communities into society. Lastly, there is a huge challenge in developing the resources to bring mother tongue education. All kinds of curricular resources, including books, would need to be made, and teachers would need to be found and trained who could teach in those languages.\textsuperscript{15} This would be quite the undertaking especially given the current lack of trained teachers all around the world.

\textsuperscript{12} Anike Nwodo, “The 10 Most Popular Languages in Nigeria,” Naij, \url{https://www.naija.ng/383776-top-10-most-popular-languages-in-nigeria.html#383776}.
\textsuperscript{14} “Papua New Guinea,” Language Education Policy Studies, \url{http://www.languageeducationpolicy.org/lepbyworldregion/papuanewguinea.html}
Instruction in a first language is very important for developing transferrable literacy skills. It also helps build confidence and develop self-esteem. Millions of children around the world do not currently have education in their first languages. Many children in the Commonwealth have English as their language of instruction, even though English is not a common spoken language in their lives. Still others receive instruction in a different majority language of their countries. There are four main policy challenges for developing comprehensive first language instruction: language choice when there is a diversity of first languages, the length of instruction in a first language, organizing non-standardized languages, and preparing teachers to teach in those languages. If these challenges can be overcome, children could see huge benefits to their education experience.

Topic B: Freedom of the Press in African Countries

Free media is essential to democracy. The transparency brought by information tends to reduce corruption and to foster public trust in institutions. The United Nations Education Social and Cultural Organization was founded for “promoting the free flow of ideas,” committed to free media. The implication of media for good governance was outlined in the UN Millennium Declaration: it produces “greater participation by civil society,” in terms of governmental responsibility towards nations and their citizens. Hence, media is crucial to hold governments accountable, and the focus on Africa, where many regimes have colonial histories, is particularly relevant.

African media has expanded in recent years. While written press is confined to urban areas, other media such as the radio have developed, targeting rural audiences. Influenced by the Anglo-

---

Saxon press, media companies developed in competition with one another, trying to expand and attempting to integrate audiences with various forms. This enabled the development of large groups such as the Kenyan Nation Media Group, which includes more than 15 newspapers and TV channels and is quoted on the Nairobi stock market.²⁰ This process was fostered by media liberalisation, influenced by countries’ adhesion to international organizations. As an example; after colonization and a repressive military regime, the new constitution of Ghana in 1992 provided for media liberalization, freedom, and independence.²¹²² The development of information and communication technologies opened spaces for information and debate, connecting people to foreign sources increasing their knowledge and awareness.²³ Further, fostered by new classes of African entrepreneurs, technologies expanded and media such as the Ghanaian radio Joy FM (1995) and its website were created.²⁴ These connect information and enable circulation and sharing, which fosters participation. Today, the radio remains the most accessible and consumed media in Ghana.²⁵

Nevertheless, the situation is not liberalistic. First, repression of the media remains constant in many African countries despite formal liberalisation. Journalists were arrested in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 2014 for holding information “endangering state security,” and were forbidden to exit the territory.²⁶ Anti-terrorist legislation is used against expression; Kenya is an example. The Security Laws Amendment Act of 2014 restricts media expression.²⁷ Because of this pressure, open criticism is rare and self-censorship prevails, preventing journalists from informing the public.²⁸ Namibia²⁹ and

²² Constitution of Ghana, Art 12 and 162(3)
²⁵ « Matérialiser les médias en chiffres », 2011
Ghana,\textsuperscript{30} considered relatively liberal, still have instances of self-censorship and harassment of journalism based on security laws. Meanwhile, Tanzania remains unstable during elections with many suspensions and arrests.\textsuperscript{31} Overall, African countries rank poorly in Press Freedom Indexes published by Reporters Without Borders. The Commonwealth has adopted legal instruments, but national laws and their enforcement are necessary to protect journalism.

Furthermore, economic interest hold media influence close to state powers. Despite multiparty systems, politicians or businessmen with political interests often control the media through corporations, which influences publications.\textsuperscript{32} African countries’ debt holds them dependent to foreign countries for investment. The IMF Structural Adjustment Programs obliged states to mediate access to financing, obliging media organizations who were asking for subsidies to restrict criticisms if they wanted to keep existing, as in Nigeria.\textsuperscript{33} The population, suspecting these practices, tends to distrust the government and big media sources, undermining the goal of media objectives.

Material factors limit media reach. In rural areas, lack of digital infrastructures prevents access to online information. And literacy remains a challenge: it determines access to written content. In Kenya, despite a literacy rate of more than 70% in 2007 and a network of newspapers, televised and online information, limited rural access restricted access to information to the radio.\textsuperscript{34} Meanwhile, in 2013, adult literacy rate was 87% in Kenya but only 61% for Ghana, and 42% for Sierra Leone.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, material and social development are crucial for the further diffusion of information and media throughout African countries.

\textsuperscript{31}“Tanzania”, Reporters Without Borders, 2017, \url{https://rsf.org/en/tanzania}
\textsuperscript{32}Somerville, Keith, « Violences et discours radiophoniques de haine au Kenya. Problèmes de définition et d'identification », 2011
\textsuperscript{33}Hall, Philippa, « « Penser pour l'empire » au sein du Nigeria colonial et postcolonial. Presse privée, médiatrice de la politique de l'État et de l'économie mondiale », 2011
\textsuperscript{34}Somerville, Keith, « Violences et discours radiophoniques de haine au Kenya. Problèmes de définition et d'identification », 2011
\textsuperscript{35}“Millennium Development Goals”, Commonwealth Governance for Development, 2013, \url{http://www.commonwealthgovernance.org/facts-figures/mdgs/}