

Empowering Africa:

The Importance of Mother Tongue Education

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Background

Mother tongue refers to the first language a person learns and uses in their early childhood, typically from their parents or immediate family members. It is the language that a person is most familiar with, and it often carries cultural and emotional significance as well. Africa is a continent with great linguistic diversity, and as a result there are many mother tongues spoken across the continent. It is estimated that there are over 2,000 different languages spoken in Africa, with some sources estimating the number to be as high as 3,000. Each language has its own unique history, culture, and way of expressing ideas and communicating. While some African countries have adopted a dominant official language such as English, French, and Portuguese, in order to improve communication, many people still use their mother tongue in their daily lives, particularly in rural areas.

In developing nations, teaching in an official language such as English has been shown to hinder children's overall educational advancement.¹ In many isolated rural areas, children speak a language different from the dominant official language at home. Typically, children in K-2nd grade receive education in their native language, but in third or fourth grade, they begin receiving instruction primarily in their national language. As a result, many students fall behind in their coursework and drop out since they can not communicate with their instructors clearly. In 2000, 84% of elementary teachers had the bare minimum of qualifications, but by 2019, only 65% did.² In fact, 40% of students worldwide enroll in classes where the instructors expect them to learn in a language they do not speak.³ Organizations such as the United Nations and UNESCO advocate for mother tongue education because of the many benefits it can provide to both students and communities.

The benefits of mother tongue education for African students are evident in research findings, which indicate that the use of a student's first language for the first few years of schooling leads to better academic performance, increased completion rates and ultimately equips students with the necessary tools to excel in their education.⁴ Implementing mother tongue education into practice can usually be expensive and time-consuming, especially for the educational institutions, and local governments, but studies show that teaching in the

mother tongue increases academic success while lowering dropout rates by as much as 50%.⁵ Mother tongue education is an essential aspect of education in Africa, proven to enhance academic achievement by dismantling language barriers and equipping students with the necessary tools to excel academically.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) asserts that children learn more effectively when they receive instruction in a language they can comprehend. This is because children's brains are naturally wired to acquire and process language more efficiently when they can understand what is being said, which helps them to build a strong foundation for learning. Numerous studies have shown that children's brains are naturally wired to acquire and process language more efficiently when they can understand what is being said. For instance, a study published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* found that students who received early literacy instruction in their first language had better reading comprehension skills in both their first language and the second language they learned later.⁶ This finding supports the



idea that teaching in the mother tongue helps to build a strong foundation for learning, which can lead to better academic outcomes and lower dropout rates. UNESCO further emphasizes that mother tongue education is a key factor in achieving quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, especially in low-income countries.

Additionally, a UNESCO report in 2019 found that only about 15% of African children complete primary education with proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics and that mother tongue instruction could help improve educational outcomes in the region.⁷ Starting school in a language other than the student's mother tongue creates a barrier because it shifts the emphasis of instruction from being learner-centered to teacher-centered. Even when students are confused, they do not seek clarification or ask inquiries. They do not discover a link between experiences at home and in school. This concept reinforces passiveness and silence in the classroom, which in turn suppresses the potential and freedom of expression of the young learners. The language barrier resulting from this circumstance lessens the young people's enthusiasm, stifles their inventiveness, and makes learning unpleasant.

Despite research demonstrating that learning in their mother tongue is more effective, a majority of African students often commence their education in a foreign language. This unfortunate practice results in poor outcomes, high dropout rates, and diminished enthusiasm for learning. For instance, a survey conducted by KNEC in Kenya revealed that 52% of 3rd grade students cannot read correctly, and up to 60% have failed a class and repeated it.⁸ The survey conducted by KNEC in Kenya revealing that a significant percentage of 3rd-grade students cannot read correctly and have failed a class is not solely attributed to educational policies but also to the language of instruction. In Kenya, the official language of instruction is English, which is not the native language for most students. Studies have shown that students who are not taught in their first language often struggle to grasp concepts and are more likely to fail or repeat classes.

Additionally, lack of resources, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate teacher training also contribute to poor academic performance. Therefore, language of instruction plays a crucial role in the educational outcomes of students, and policymakers must consider it when formulating education policies. The issue was exacerbated in rural places, when kids hardly ever have any contact with English outside of the classroom. For example, a former administrative region in Kenya, Nyanza Province: "Nyanza Province had the highest number of repeaters, at 69%, followed by Eastern 67%, Western 60% and Coast 58%."⁹ For education to be

effective, the syllabus's approach and material must be tailored to the requirements and skills of the students, and the goals must be expressed in terms of how the students should behave. When learning begins in a language that is unfamiliar to the student, students experience a much greater barrier and dissatisfaction. It would be detrimental to recognized educational principles to anticipate a child's acquisition of a new language while also establishing literacy and other abilities solely in this new language. Requesting fluency in reading and writing before acquiring a sufficient level of language comprehension is analogous to requiring one to run before mastering the art of standing upright.

History

The history of mother tongue education in Africa extends back to the pre-colonial era, when African societies had their own languages, traditions, and educational systems. European powers forced their languages and education systems on African communities during the colonial period. As a result, African languages have been marginalized and stigmatized, and European languages have been used as the medium of teaching in schools. Rather than supporting the intellectual and cultural growth of African nations, the colonial education system was designed to produce a workforce that would serve European interests. Following independence, several African countries began to reconsider their educational institutions, as well as the importance

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of African languages in education.¹⁰ A mother tongue education movement gained traction in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in Tanzania, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. The goal of the movement was to promote the use of African languages in schools as a means of developing national unity, cultural identity, and academic accomplishment. In Tanzania, for example, in the early 1970s, the government implemented a strategy of Swahili medium education.¹¹ This policy sought to make Swahili, a widely spoken African language, the predominant language of education. The policy was successful in ex-

tending access to school for rural children who could not speak English, the colonial language of teaching.¹² Other countries, such as Ethiopia and Rwanda, adopted similar approaches. Many African countries have now implemented laws that encourage the use of mother tongue instruction in early childhood education, with the goal of establishing a strong foundation for academic accomplishment and cultural identity. However, due to a lack of competent teachers, insufficient resources, and the dominance of European languages in higher education and the labor market, implementing these goals remains a struggle.

African children are exposed to the cultural customs, myths, and histories ingrained in their language when they are taught in their native tongue. This encourages kids to value and respect their language and culture while instilling a sense of pride in their cultural history. This, in turn, promotes cultural diversity and understanding, both of which are necessary for the development of strong and cohesive civilizations.¹³ The development of mother tongue education has been considered as a strategy to mitigate the detrimental impacts of colonialism on African languages and cultures in many African countries. European powers forced their languages and education systems on African cultures during the colonial era, resulting in the marginalization and stigmatization of African languages. This resulted in Africans losing their cultural identity and feeling inferior.

Many African governments are now developing laws that encourage the use of mother tongue instruction in schools in order to reaffirm the relevance of African languages and cultures. In South Africa, for example, the government has adopted a multilingual education programme that aims to promote the use of African languages in classrooms. The employment of Swahili as a medium of teaching in Tanzania has aided in the promotion of national unity and cultural identity. Overall, mother tongue education is critical to preserve Africa's rich cultural history. African countries are taking vital steps to maintain their unique cultural identities and to establish strong and cohesive communities based on cultural diversity and understanding by encouraging the use of African languages in schools.¹⁴

Myths on multilingualism

Rural parents in Kenya and Uganda are concerned that their children may fall behind their urban peers who begin their education in English and won't be able to compete because they may not understand the class material adequately.¹⁵ These parents prefer that their children skip their mother tongue education altogether and go straight to learning English. In Zimbabwe, studies showed that "parents and children had a more positive attitude towards English than the mother tongue as the

language of instruction at infant level."¹⁶ According to the parents, "the child who uses English grows up understanding the subject matter better while the use of the mother tongue would hamper understanding in the child."¹⁷

However, research has shown that starting education in a child's mother tongue can lead to better learning outcomes and higher academic achievement.¹⁸ When children are taught in a language that they are most familiar with, they are more likely to understand the material being taught and retain that knowledge. This is because they do not have to spend as much time translating the material from a foreign language to their own language, which can be a barrier to learning. By starting education in a child's native tongue, they are able to develop a strong foundation in their language, which can help them to learn other languages later on. For instance, a UNESCO study revealed that children in Ethiopia who received instruction in their native language outperformed those who got instruction in a foreign language on standardized tests.¹⁹ Many parents, who are unaware of their children's linguistic abilities, think that adding too many languages to the school system will hinder students' ability to study.

Another common misconception is that speaking in one's mother tongue while in school prevents one from learning since mother tongues are unable to express the sophisticated concepts that are taught in official language education. There is a misunderstanding that these native tongue languages cannot be used in modern commercial, technological, and educational endeavors, however, linguistically, this misunderstanding is false. A report by UNESCO found that mother tongue-based multilingual education can improve access to quality education and increase the retention and achievement rates of students.²⁰ Furthermore, there are many examples of successful modern-day usage of mother tongue languages in various fields, such as technology, medicine, and commerce. Therefore, the idea that mother tongues are unable to express sophisticated concepts is a misconception that does not align with the current linguistic research and practical experience.

Mother tongue education

Using mother tongue instruction in the classroom allows children to connect their experiences of learning at home with learning at school, resulting in better academic development, higher levels of literacy, increased participation, and reduced workload for teachers. Research has shown that a strong foundation in the first language can facilitate learning in subsequent languages and improve reading and comprehension skills. In addition, mother tongue instruction has been found to be more effective than colonial language systems in promoting literacy and cognitive development, and it

can improve both student and teacher performance in non-native language learning situations. Rajesh Ramachandran, a postdoctoral researcher at Heidelberg University, has also looked into the effects of colonial systems and found that mother tongue instruction has a positive impact. Ramachandran calculated that 69% of adults with five years of schooling in systems that used indigenous languages could read a whole sentence, compared to 41% in colonial or mixed language systems, in international research released by UNESCO.²¹ This literacy difference increased from 28 to 40 percentage points once age, religion, and place of residence were taken into account. Children who are studying in their mother tongue are also encouraged to actively participate in the learning process since they understand the topic being taught and can confidently respond to questions.²² It is worth noting that teaching in native languages does not necessarily have to cause a decline in English or French proficiency. Many African countries use English or French as the official language of instruction alongside the local languages. In these cases, students can still learn English or French as a second or third language while receiving primary education in their mother tongue. Additionally, some studies have suggested that students who learn in their mother tongue tend to be more proficient in other languages as well because they have a strong foundation in language learning.²³

A study conducted in Kenya, a nation with two official languages and 66 regional dialects, revealed that there are frequent linguistic hurdles in the classroom. The majority of kids in Marsabit speak Borana as their first language. Once they begin school, they must learn Swahili and English so that they can communicate with their teachers. The outcomes are devastating in terms of education. The idea of teachers leading earlier grades in the kids' first language is one way to overcome these language hurdles. As explained by Wendy Erasmus in Kenya, "children can get comfortable with reading and writing in a language that they know." "Then over year three and four they phase into English and Swahili. What we've seen is terribly exciting... an impressive increase in these children's ability to read and write." This approach is in line with the UNESCO recommendation for early mother tongue instruction. Gains from this early instruction will be maintained as pupils go into national language programs. Additionally essential to success is bilingual teacher training.

Overall, success in early learning depends on a curriculum that is based in the child's own language, culture, and surroundings as well as on reading and teaching resources that are suitable and created locally. Early education in the home language supports child-centric strategies in multilingual settings. It starts off with the well-known before gradually introducing fresh facts. It encourages curiosity, encourages more participation,

and makes the transition from the home to the classroom easier. This prepares young students for learning to read by fostering fluency and confidence in both their home language and, eventually, other languages as needed.

Conclusion

In order to promote mother language education in Africa, governments, educators, and communities must work together. It is crucial for Africa's education system to value native languages as critical learning aids. Local languages should be recognised as crucial components of the education system by African governments, and they should be recognised and promoted in the same manner that other languages are. One strategy to accomplish this is to enact policies that encourage the use of local languages as a medium of instruction. African governments should promote the use of local languages in the classroom and ensure that children have the opportunity to learn and use their mother tongue as a learning tool.²⁴

This can be accomplished through enacting rules that

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encourage the use of local languages as a medium of instruction, as well as by giving incentives and support to teachers who specialize in teaching in local languages. African governments should not only promote the use of local languages as a medium of education, but also provide resources and help to instructors who specialize in teaching in local languages. This can become a possibility through providing instructors with training and professional development opportunities, as well as ensuring that instructional materials and textbooks are available in local languages. By respecting local languages as vital learning aids, African countries can ensure that all students have access to high-quality education that is relevant to their local context. Local languages can assist children develop a feeling of pride and identity while also contributing to the preservation of local cultures and customs. Finally, considering indigenous languages as key learning aids is critical for developing inclusive and culturally responsive education in Africa.²⁵