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# Language policy and instructional practice dichotomy: The case of primary schools in Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

“Clear grounding in a location gives us the confidence to engage with knowledge from other locations as we deconstruct and reconstruct them with our purposes” (Canagarajah, 2005, p. 15). This quote serves the basis of what this paper presents on language policy and pedagogical practices in Ghana. Language plays an important role in pedagogy, it is the medium through which concepts are thought, learned and also assessed. The use of foreign language as a medium of instruction in multilingual classroom is often characterized by a number of challenges. This paper reports of a study which sort to explore headteachers’ and teachers’ knowledge about the Ghanaian medium of instruction policy and how this policy is being applied in Ghanaian schools. Interviews were carried out with 10 headteachers selected from 10 schools. Qualitative analysis of the results revealed what appeared to be gaps between what the policy says and what the research participants do in their schools. Implication for these gaps between policy and practice on students’ learning outcomes is discussed to inform future policies in Ghana and other Sub-Saharan Africa that have similar situation as in Ghana.

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## 1. Introduction

Ghana is located in West Africa. It is bounded on the north by Burkina Faso, on the west by Ivory Coast, on the east by Togo and on the south by Gulf of Guinea. Ghana was a former British colony under the name of Gold Coast. The country covers an area of 238,534 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 23,478,000 (2007 estimate; United Nations, 2007 report) and a population density of 98/km<sup>2</sup>. For political reasons, English language has continued to remain Ghana’s only official and national language. Ghana presently has a system of a 12-year pre-university/pre-tertiary education. This is made up of six years of primary school education, three years of junior secondary school education and three years of senior secondary school/technical/vocational education. Primary school education for children typically begins at the age of six. The medium of instruction at the lower primary (grade 1–3) levels is still the local language (spoken in the local community where the school is situated) with English being used as the medium of instruction at all other levels. However, it is worth noting that even though local languages are supposed to be used as the medium of instruction at the lower primary levels, all books (textbooks, work books and teachers’ handbooks) at this level, with the exception of Ghanaian language books, are written in English. This presents challenges for students, who have to grapple with the onerous task of receiving instruction in one language but read their textbooks and do assignments in another language.

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English is the only official language of Ghana, although some 49 languages and dialects are spoken in the country. Nine of these languages (other than English) are government-sponsored and are therefore studied in schools, these being Akan, Dagaare/Wale, Dagbane, Dangme, Ewe, Ga, Gonja, Kasem and Nzema. Hausa is the lingua franca spoken among the country's minority, especially in the north, whilst Twi is spoken by the Akans in the south. This study was carried out in Fante speaking environment, implying that schools involved are expected to use Fante as medium of instruction from grades 1 to 3.

Bi/multi-lingual education as it pertains in Ghana seems to be historical in its origin. Literature points to the fact that local languages were used at the lower primary level from 1529 to 1951, with the first legislation on the use of a Ghanaian language promulgated in 1925. From 1951 to 1973 the use of Ghanaian language as a medium of instruction had a chequered history until 1974, when Ghana reverted to the use of the old policy of using a Ghanaian language as a medium of instruction for the lower primary level (Owu-Ewie, 2006), which has been enforced up to the present. An attempt was however made to change this policy to the use of English throughout the entire system of education in 2002, but this was met with resistance.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this paper, we used a critical postcolonial discursive framework in theorizing our research. The colonial era is over in Ghana. However, the legacy of former British rule continues to exert a strong influence in terms of English language. Ghana, for instance, has no national language of her own but rather adopted English, the language of her former colonial power as the official national language. Although traditional colonialism is not apparent in contemporary Ghana as it used to in colonial situations the imposition of a foreign language exemplifies a form of domination. Postcolonial theory provides a framework which helps to question education practices which still bear the hallmark of colonization (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2011; Hudson, 2003; Jordão, 2008). A postcolonial theoretical framework highlights the need to be aware of the powerful effects of foreign language dominance on local education systems through colonialism and imperialism and their implications for children's conceptual understanding in learning. Willinsky (1998) argued that the educational legacies of imperialism live on strongly within us and within our education systems. A plethora of literature on postcolonial studies expose the internationalization of English as the most powerful tool that is homogenizing and universalizing, as well as 'ruling the world' (Bhabha, 1983; Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1980; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Luke, 1996; Pennycook, 1994). In this regard the current discourse and impositions of English language in Ghanaian schools replay colonial domination and alienation from one's context as it occurred during the period of British colonization. It is therefore important to engage in postcolonial discursive practices to problematize existing colonial practices of language use in Ghanaian primary schools. According to Hudson (2003), "discursive practices derive from the constructs of language embodied in discourse" (p. 1). Gee (1990), conceptualizes discourse as "a combination of 'saying-doing-thinking-feeling-valuing'" (p. xv) something. This implies language is not the expression of unique individuality (Hudson, 2003). It is a socially constructed practice that reflects the subjectivities of a social group (Barthes, 1986). Because society is dynamic language is always open to challenge and redefinition (Derrida, 1976).

It can be argued that the social constructs within a particular society or school systems determine the purpose and use of language. Derrida (1976) perceives language as a powerful discourse entrenched in context and situations. For Schiffrin (1994), meaning is an intrinsic part of the communicative process involved in any discourse. In this way, context serves an important platform for the dynamic, ever-changing aspect of language (Schiffrin, 1994). Discourse is governed by the ways a particular society uses it to serve its purpose and function. Some language policies and practices may serve to maintain certain or particular discursive practice of domination or alienation thus invoking the notions of postcolonial. We have chosen a critical postcolonial discursive framework because it seeks to interrogate how subjectivity is constructed through social organisation, meaning, power and perceptions (Dirlik, 1994; Slemon, 1990) which play out through language. Weedon (1994) discusses the issue that subjectivity is produced in a whole range of discursive practices. "Discursive practices" mean an engagement *with* rather than *to* the subject" and that "interaction with language involves construction of subjectivity in ways that are socially specific" (Hudson, 2003, p. 2). The first author engaged with the headteachers to a large extent by creating conditions for them to freely discuss wide range of issues relating to implementation of the language policy in their schools during interview sessions. The theoretical framework gave us the conceptual space to analyse what the participants discussed during data collection.

## 3. Purpose of study and research question(s)

This study was designed to explore the relationship between the medium of instruction that headteachers (school principals) said the teachers in their schools use in teaching at the primary school level and the Ghanaian language of instruction policy. The questions that guided the study therefore were:

1. "how does the medium of instruction used at the lower primary school level in Ghana reflect the policy of the day?"
2. "how does the medium of instruction used at the upper primary school level in Ghana reflect the policy of the day?"
3. "what are the gaps between the language and education policy, and headteachers' view on pedagogical practice or needs of students?"

#### 4. Method

As a postcolonial framework seeks to understand embedded discourses, constructs, representation, and aspects of educational practices that are disempowering we used a qualitative approach to gather the views of ten headteachers from ten primary schools in the Cape Coast Metropolis of Ghana. The schools consisted of a mix of above average, average and below average achieving schools. These schools were randomly chosen using the stratified random sampling procedure (Mertens, 2010). The school types formed stratum from which the table of random numbers was used to randomly select the schools. More average achieving schools were chosen because about half of the schools in the research locale were in this category of schools. In each of the schools the first author gave a short presentation, explaining the purpose of the whole research project to the headteachers before they were invited to participate. The interviews were made up of two parts. The first part elicited the research participants' biographical data whilst the second part elicited information on the language(s) teachers use in teaching in class. The second part of the interviews was to help the researchers to explore gaps between what the language policy says and what teachers do in practice. The interview guide was constructed by the first author and was validated with colleagues in teacher education. It was also pilot tested in a school in the Elmina district in Ghana. The interviews were carried out by the first author in November, 2008. Whilst we agree that results from interviewing 10 ( $N = 10$ ) headteachers may not reflect the national situation, it is our hope and belief that it will unearth what might be going on in schools and eventually lead to more studies. That will go a long to promote a new understanding of the Ghanaian language policy within the school environments.

#### 5. Data analysis

As the postcolonial discursive framework shares a common interest in the primacy of texts and language we analysed the data by focusing on language, embedded discourses, constructs, representation, and aspects of the language policy that are disempowering. Our analyses also focused on narratives of identity formation and alienation occurring under the language policy. We analyzed the interview data using the principles similar to the Grounded Theory method developed by Glaser and Strauss (Charmaz, 1983). We sorted and categorized the interview data to identify issues related policy-practice dichotomy which are pertinent to our research questions. This enabled us to order the headteachers' story. Basically, our approach involved labeling excerpts from the interview text; critically examining the excerpts with our theoretical lenses and presenting and commenting on the interview excerpts in relation to the research questions. We were not concerned with presenting the findings under themes as there are many approaches to presenting qualitative research report.

#### 6. Results

The Ghanaian language of instruction policy stipulates the use of the local language as the medium of instruction from primary 1 to 3 and English language as the medium of instruction from primary 4 onwards (MOESS, 2008). The language(s) of instruction that headteachers said their teachers use in teaching all subjects at the primary school level are summarized in Table 1.

Results from Table 1 shows that headteachers from half of the schools (HZ, HC, HP, HY and HF) indicated that English was solely used as the medium of instruction at the upper primary level, four of them (HA, HW, HL and HX) also indicated that English was mainly used, however, the local language (Fante) was occasionally used to explain difficult concepts. In school A the headteacher (HA) for instance explained, "From the upper primary level it is strictly English, except when there are concepts that students do not understand" whilst the headteacher of school T also explained, "... sometimes during teaching, some of them would not understand the lesson in English, so when you go for 'Fante' they pick it very fast." Only one headteacher (from school ST) indicated that a combination of both the English and Fante was used at the upper primary school level.

The results also show that all headteachers from average schools indicated the use of only English as the medium of instruction, while the majority of headteachers from the other school types indicated the use of mainly English and occasional use of Fante when students have difficulty understanding the lesson in English. Language use at the lower primary level showed all the headteachers indicating the use of both English language and Fante in their schools. However, two of them (from schools SX and SL) indicated that their schools emphasize the use of English as compared to Fante. The headteacher of school P for instance explained why the school emphasizes the use of English language at the lower primary as:

in fact the language policy is that it should be Ghanaian language but we want the children to start picking the English language. But for the teaching of English we use only English in teaching but for mathematics, science and the other subjects we mix them up (use English and the local language). We realize that if we go strictly by the policy sometimes they get problems when they get to the upper primary where they have to change over to use English throughout. The children are not able to read, they are not able to respond very well with the English so we try to mix them up. If they can start picking a few sentences they can communicate when they get to the upper primary (HP, 29/9/2008).

Some of the typical responses other headteachers gave in support of the use of English language as medium of instruction included the following:

**Table 1**  
Summary of language use in schools.

School	Achievement level	Level of education	Language use
SZ	AA	Upper primary	At the upper primary level it should be solely English
SA	AA	Lower primary	It is said that both English and Fante [the Ghanaian language] should be used from basic 1 to 3 ... from the upper primary level it is strictly English except when there are concepts that students do not understand that the local language is used to help them to understand
		Upper primary	
SW	AA	Lower primary	At the Kindergarten (KG), Fante (the local language) is used whilst both Fante and English language are used at the lower primary. More English is used as compared to the local language
		Upper primary	At the upper primary we use English throughout however occasionally we use the local language to simplify things for the children
ST	AA	Lower primary	In the lower primary we mix [English and the local language]
		Upper primary	From primary four to six too we combine them. Sometimes, during teaching some of them would not understand the lesson in English so when you go for Fante they pick it very fast
SC	A	Lower primary	From primary one to three we combine them
		Upper primary	In the upper primary up to JHS it is solely English
SP	A	Lower primary	In the lower primary we use both Fante and English
		Upper primary	At the upper primary we use English throughout except in the Ghanaian language class
SY	A	Lower primary	For P1–P3 we mix the two languages, in fact the language policy is that it should be Ghanaian language but we want the children to start picking the English language. But for the teaching of English we use only English in teaching but for mathematics, science and the other subjects we mix them up...
		Upper primary	At the upper primary is solely English
SL	BA	Lower primary	From Kindergarten to class three normally they mix the local language with the English language
		Upper primary	Generally, we use English language when we are teaching. We use English language at all levels, but when the children are finding difficulty in understanding we use the local language English [occasional use of local language]
SX	BA	Upper primary	At the upper primary [grades 4–6] English is mainly used [however] because some of the children do not understand lessons which are delivered in English, so the local language (Fante) is used to help them understand the lesson better
		Lower primary	At the lower primary level [grades 1–3] also a mixture of Fante and English is used. At both levels English language is more
SF	BA	Upper primary	With the upper primary up to the JHS it is strictly English and then the vernacular comes in when it is specified on the timetable, when it is not specified on the timetable it is supposed to be all English
		Lower primary	Normally we use English language but with the primary pupils up to around P4 we use both the local language and the foreign language, stressing much on the local language

Note: AA, above average achieving school; A, average achieving school; BA, below average achieving school.

“It [English] is the accepted language generally, the common language for all Ghanaians. English is all over the place, as I said if one is able to express himself well he knows what goes on in the country, good self-expression and so on that is why we are also emphasizing it.” (HW, 25/9/2008)

We think that from the basic, that is, from class one to three they are not all that matured to understand lessons in English so we think that by the completion of class three they would have matured enough to understand lessons in English, it is like we use English from class four to JHS (HC, 25/9/2008)

None of the headteachers referred to the policy of the day.

## 7. Discussion

The results show that schools do not appear to follow the language of instruction policy, which stipulates the use of local language spoken in the community where the school is situated as the medium of instruction. The indication is that English is positioned as the superior language because of the perceived opportunities it creates for students in the international job market than the local languages. This position disempowers local language use in schools. All headteachers indicated that their teachers use both the local language and English language to teach at the lower primary level. The medium of instruction used at the upper primary school level however differed among the schools. Half of the headteachers indicated the use of only the English language, an indication of strict adherence to the language of instruction policy. Four of them also indicating that their teachers use mainly English language as the medium of instruction, but use Fante language as an additional resource to enhance students' understanding of concepts, shows that majority (4 out of 5) of the remaining schools also emphasize the use of English at that level. However, one interesting characteristic about the results is that there is no pattern in language use and students' level of achievement.

There is clear evidence that gaps existed between what the language of instruction policy of the Ghana says and what all schools do at the lower primary level, and half of them do at the upper primary level. At the lower primary whilst the policy

emphasizes the use of the local language as the medium of instruction, schools generally use both English and the Ghanaian language, with schools like School L rather emphasizing the use of English language. It appears perceived failure of the current policy might have contributed to the present situation where schools follow their own policies rather than the national policy. This is reflected in headteacher HP's reason for not following the language of instruction policy even though she was aware of the policy:

in fact the language policy is that it should be Ghanaian language but we want the children to start picking the English language. . . . We realize that if we go strictly by the policy sometimes they get problems when they get to the upper primary where they have to change over to use English throughout. The children are not able to read, . . . (HP, 29/9/2008)

The headteacher's comments have revealed the confused nature of language use in classroom teaching induced by lack of schools' adherence to the Ghanaian government language policy directives. The use of English as a mediating language to provide literary meaning and understanding to local languages in the classrooms is not considered only problematic, but colonising because it presupposes that the colonial language supersedes the native language in providing children with conceptual understanding. The headteachers' comments also show the tension the schools face in implementing language policy which is itself linguistically colonized. It is evident that schools are implementing their own policies instead of the national policy, especially at the lower primary level. This is an indication that their voice might not have been heard in the formulation of the language of instruction policy. However, we argue that taking into consideration and using the official language permitted in the geographical area not only enhances conceptual understanding but also promotes identity formation which is crucial for student engagement.

Social and political support for English language as the only official and national language of Ghana appear to also influence the implementation of the language of instruction policy at the lower primary level:

"It [English] is the accepted language generally, the common language for all Ghanaians. English is all over the place, as I said if one is able to express himself well he knows what goes on in the country, good self-expression and so on that is why we are also emphasizing it." (HW, 25/9/2008)

There is another problem here. The language policy appears to be selective and exclusive in application, for instance, our experience with schools indicate that private and some special urban public schools tended to use English language throughout their teaching and learning practices. We perceived this as colonising because it disengages the children from their own identity as Ghanaians (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2011). For example, in many cases students who flout the rules and use the local languages are subjected to punishment by the teachers in these schools. The English language is a social good or commodity (Bourdieu, 1991) in Ghana. Those who are able to express themselves in fluid English are accorded special respect (symbolic capital) and therefore accepted at all social functions or gathering. However, those who are not able to express themselves in English are often mistakenly described as illiterates even if they can read and write in the local language. They are therefore excluded from certain social functions, especially the formal ones such as graduation ceremonies where the formal or official language is used. The tension between meeting the expectation of parents and future needs of students on the one hand, and following government's policy which is perceived by schools as impracticable in a school system where progression from one level of education to another depends on examinations which are conducted in English language on the other hand, could also explain why schools do not follow the language policy at the lower primary level. In our view this is systemic colonisation – colonisation imposed from within the school system and not the external (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2011).

By and large we also attributed the situation to the fact that the plurality of Ghanaian languages makes it difficult for the government of Ghana to normalise any language as the national language. Doing so will incur the wrath and disintegration of the society. Thus the colonising language, English, again is seen here as a unifying force. This is an oxymoron. A critical analysis of the language policy would demonstrate that instead of advancing the course of all students, it is rather segregating some students, especially those from the rural areas and poor family background and making them less competitive in the Ghanaian educational and economic spaces. The findings of this study therefore suggests that implementation of the current language policy is a token to bring about political recognition, identity and superficial cultural preservation rather than a significant shift in ideology and pedagogy to enhance children's understanding and formation of concepts.

Furthermore, unlike the lower primary, the language use at the upper primary level appears to reflect the language of instruction policy. English language is mainly used as the medium of instruction because:

We think that from the basic, that is, from class one to three they are not all that matured to understand lessons in English so we think that by the completion of class three they would have matured enough to understand lessons in English, it is like we use English from class four to JHS (HC, 25/9/2008)

It is evident from headteacher HC's statement that language use in the school does not necessarily depend on the policy of the day but on the readiness of the students to learn in Ghana's only official and national language. The current situation in Ghanaian schools as evident through this research suggests English language is considered as having a more prestigious socio-economically determined status (Jefferies, 1996) than Ghanaian languages which are regarded as inferior. This situation does not only reinforce the domination and colonisation of children's conceptual development but also invariably, places linguistic and cultural systems in conflict with each other instead of complementing one another (Robinson, 1996).

It appears schools have still not understood the rationale of teaching children whose home language is different from the language of instruction in school has still not gone down well with some headteachers of Ghanaian schools. However, upon all the emphasis on the English language even at the lower primary school level, Ghanaian public school students' performance in English language at the primary school level has not been as good as expected (Amuah, Agezo, Kotey, & Kwao, 2006). Literature suggests that bilinguals who get the opportunity to study for the first few years in their mother tongue eventually master the language of instruction and eventually perform well in school (Ndamba, 2008). It is argued that children with a high degree of bilingualism are predisposed to have a better level of cognitive development (Ndamba, 2008). In Lambert's (1977) view bilingualism becomes effective when society attributes equal positive values to both the child's first and languages. We argue that the policy of the Ghanaian government at the lower primary level is a positive step because research shows that if a child masters the first language, he/she is able to overcome obstacles in learning another language (Obanya, 1985; Dawes, 1988). For us what remains to be done is rigorous research information to enhance teachers' understanding of the value of first language in conceptual formation in children and also an efficient monitoring system to enforce the policy at the lower primary school level.

## 8. Conclusion and recommendations

The findings suggest the language policy is not currently being adhered to. It can be explained that:

The headteachers had a more positive attitude towards English than the mother tongue as the language of instruction because of its economic value or prestige in Ghanaian society. This shows that Ghanaian teachers are still linguistically colonized and thus have more faith in English than Ghanaian languages. It also shows the consequence of tensions schools face taking on board future needs of the students they turn out and simultaneously following government policy. In this era of globalisation where English is increasingly gaining recognition as a global language makes it even more attractive as the language of instruction to schools. However, students should not be denied the benefit of learning only in their local language for the first few years of education for whatever reason(s). Headteachers and teachers need to be exposed to research information concerning the value of using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction as we stand to argue that these participants were not aware of the theoretical and educational benefits of using children's mother tongue during their initial years of schooling. Professional development of teachers nation-wide on the significance of mother tongue in conceptual development would help to create a new generation of Ghanaian headteachers and teachers who value Ghanaian languages as an important aspect of children's cognitive development as well as national development. The success of this would depend on the commitment of Ghanaian policy actors in education. We would also agree with Davis (2010) that the policy should rather give room for a gradual shift from the use of the local language to English from grade four onwards, instead of sudden shift to the use of English language in grade four. Also, future policy on language of instruction in Ghana and other developing countries which share similar situation as in Ghana should take into consideration the views of schools (headteachers and teachers), since they are the final consumers of the policy.

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