

The Evolution of Local Language Literacy Instruction in Uganda

As far back as 1947 the colonial Directors of Education of the four anglophone East African countries recognised the significance of local languages versus regional languages as Languages of Instruction (LOI) in primary education and recommended that:

- *The main area language in each region should be the sole medium of instruction throughout P1-4 if it was sufficiently developed and widespread to justify the provision of the necessary textbooks.*
- *Local vernaculars, spoken in smaller areas only, should be used as the medium of instruction in Primary One in their areas, after which children should be taught in one of the main regional languages.*

The 1989 *Education Policy Review Commission* commented as follows on primary language policy:

- *One major issue in determining language policy is the feasibility of implementation. The languages that are chosen to be the LOI for all subjects in the lower primary classes, or used in adult education, must have an adequate and available literature, or one that can be easily and quickly produced in order to enable the new literates to continue to apply literacy skills.*
- *The Commission recommends that the mother tongue should be used as a medium of instruction in all education programmes up to P4.*
- *The area language (a language of wider communication) should be taught as a subject in primary schools. The area language should be an examinable subject in the Primary Leaving Examinations.*

The 1992 *Government White Paper (GWP)* amended the recommendations of the Education Review Commission as follows:

- *The LOI in rural areas was specified as the relevant local language for P1-4 and English for P5-7.*
- *English was specified as the LOI in all urban areas for P1-7.*
- *English and Kiswahili were specified as compulsory languages in all schools from P1-7 with the intention of gradually switching to Kiswahili as the LOI.*
- *Relevant area languages were recommended to be taught as subjects in both urban and rural areas but examination as part of the PLE was optional, although UNEB was required to provide exams in five specified main area languages for those who wished to take them.*

In 1999 the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) issued a circular entitled *Teaching Mother Tongue in Primary*. This circular provided the following policy guidance:

- *Mother Tongue or the most commonly used area language should be the LOI for P1-P4.*
- *All schools should select as a LOI only languages with a developed orthography.*
- *Where the LOI is not understood by all learners, special attention will be given to learners who do not understand the language.*
- *In urban areas where mother tongue might be difficult to use as a LOI, English may be used.*
- *Local languages could (sic) be taught as a subject.*
- *All instruction for P5-7 will be in English.*

- *The LOI will be the language of evaluation. Thus, if the LOI is Runyoro/Rutoro examinations must be set in the same language.*
- *The decision on the use of a local language as the LOI will be taken by the school administration and the DLB.*
- *The GOU will produce instructional materials in the 6 languages of Luo, Lugbara, Luganda, Runyankore/Rukiga, Runyoro/Rutoro and Ateso/Ngakaramajong.*
- *All Districts must form District Language Boards, although several Districts using a common local language can combine to form a DLB.*
- *All Districts should inform NCDC of the local languages selected as LOIs in their Districts.*

In 2004, after test results from a wide variety of sources demonstrated that most Ugandan children failed to achieve adequate literacy standards, the Ministry of Education and Sports instituted a rigorous curriculum review process. The result was the *Thematic Curriculum Reform of 2006*. Key changes in the early primary curriculum included:

- *A curriculum focused on three core subjects in Primary 1-3: literacy, numeracy and life skills.*
- *A thematic approach to instruction in these three core subjects.*
- *Renewed emphasis on the use of local language as the LOI in Primary 1-3, with a transition to English in Primary 4.*
- *First literacy acquisition in a local language with ninety minutes of local language instruction per day (a local language literacy hour followed by either a 30-minute lesson in Oral Literature or News).*
- *English as a subject in P1-3 (30-minutes per day). Oral English only in P1. Reading and writing slowly introduced in P2-3.*
- *A competency-based assessment model with a focus on daily, continuous assessment of pupils.*

In 2012, the USAID-funded Uganda School Health and Reading Program (SHRP), an initiative implemented by RTI and SIL LEAD, in cooperation with the Ugandan Ministry of Education commenced operation. The program selected twelve Ugandan languages representing all areas of the country. They carried out extensive orthography reviews of each language in coordination with district/area language associations. After the orthographies were revised and approved by the language associations and NCDC, pedagogical materials (primarily teacher's guides and pupil primers) were developed in the twelve languages, as well as English. These materials cover Primary 1-4. The program did extensive teacher training and supervision support. The result is that thousands of government schools in Uganda now have adequate instructional materials to teach literacy in their local language. Nevertheless, there are still many languages without adequate instructional resources.