

Mother-tongue as a Facilitator of Learning: What lessons should governments and their people learn?

Robinah Kyeyune

Guiding definition - *language*

“the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a **community**”

“a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meaning” (Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language)

Basic theories and principles - *language*

- Language is **cognition** and **behavior**.
- Language is a psychological facility so fundamental to human **development** and social interaction.
- Language is often understood as a facility used by **a group of people**.
- A group of people share an identity, and they communicate with each other about their world and their experiences.
- Language is **expression**, and is used to moderate ideas and feelings.

Basic theories and principles - *language and learning*

Children (What about adults?) learn better in a familiar language (Cummins 2000; Kosonen 2005; Kioko, 2015).

The home language, a mother-tongue, first language or area local language is a natural medium of expression of their personal thoughts, their cultural heritage, and their wants.

National language policies based on these universal facts are easily ignored, easily reversed and poorly implemented (Gove & Cvelich, 2010; Muthwii, 2007; Trudell & Piper 2013).

Observations in learning contexts

- Why does a child fail to compute 2×3 , $2 + 5$?
What do “times”, “repeated addition” or “plus” mean?
- Why do UWEZO, NAPE and EGRA results tell us that children are not reading age and grade level appropriate texts?
- What does an author mean by this?
“Sets with exactly the same but with different numbers of elements or sets with different type but same number of elements are called UNEQUAL sets.” (textbook definition)
- What does a child mean by this?
“For me unequal sets are sets where everything is not the same.” (P6 pupil’s definition)

Observations in learning context

- How are university graduates coping?

“Learner’s reading culture can be determined by one social background, students when come from poor social economic background are not in facilitation of reading materials; therefore affects attitude of reading. For example students tend to have a poor reading culture incompetence to reading skills. I will use the behaviourist theory of learners must be rewarded with positive or negative rewards to teach my students Kiswahili.”

Simple lessons about our *classrooms*

- Learners (and no doubt teachers and authors) are struggling with the language of instruction, among other things.
- This is simply as would be, given the reality that only 7% of the world's population speaks English as their first language.
- *Learning* is at stake because learners are *forced*, very early, to *communicate* in an unfamiliar language, which introduces confusion in the development process.

Where did we start going wrong?

- Teaching practices are devoid of basic principles of learning.

1. Premature introduction of a second (foreign) language, especially in metropolitan contexts

Few understand that learning a new language is a hazardous experience – a new way of thinking, feeling and acting; it is a completely new means of physical, emotional and intellectual response (Douglas Brown, 1987).

Where did we start going wrong?

2. Irrational learning loads

The learner has to cope with learning new concepts in a new language.

Opinion leaders who think that their languages are a shame, uninformed policy leaders, parents and politicians do not understand what *learning* is about.

There is no care for the materially and consequently intellectually disadvantaged majority who fail to learn.

Where did we start going wrong?

3. Leaders ignore the principles of learning.

The means to learning - acquisition of knowledge: study, experience or instruction are all **intentional** and can not be taken for granted.

Learning is **retention** and later appropriate use of knowledge in response to **dynamic** situations.

Learning is **cognition** or **organization** of knowledge.

Learning is **permanent** behavior change.

Where did we start going wrong?

4. Leaders deny the child the right to an education in a familiar language.

A child acquires vocabulary and structures in their language early in life and builds confidence in its oral use due to the rewards they realize. Children entering school for the first time look to this foundation for a scaffold to learning.

Condemnation of mother-tongue based early grade curricula, usually in pursuit of economic indicators of globalization (Muthwii & Kioko, 2003), is ignorance of the fundamental development path and of a basic right.

Where did we start going wrong?

5. Leaders do not listen to the universal facts of transferability of foundational competences.

Education in a familiar language is a natural bridge to second language learning.

Children who are systematically supported to master the vocabulary of their language, to be fluent in it, to *talk about* concepts in a language they understand will find it easier to work in an additional language (Balystock, 2001).

Where did we start going wrong?

6. Our systems often lack good learning models.

Children face a demand to learn from print.

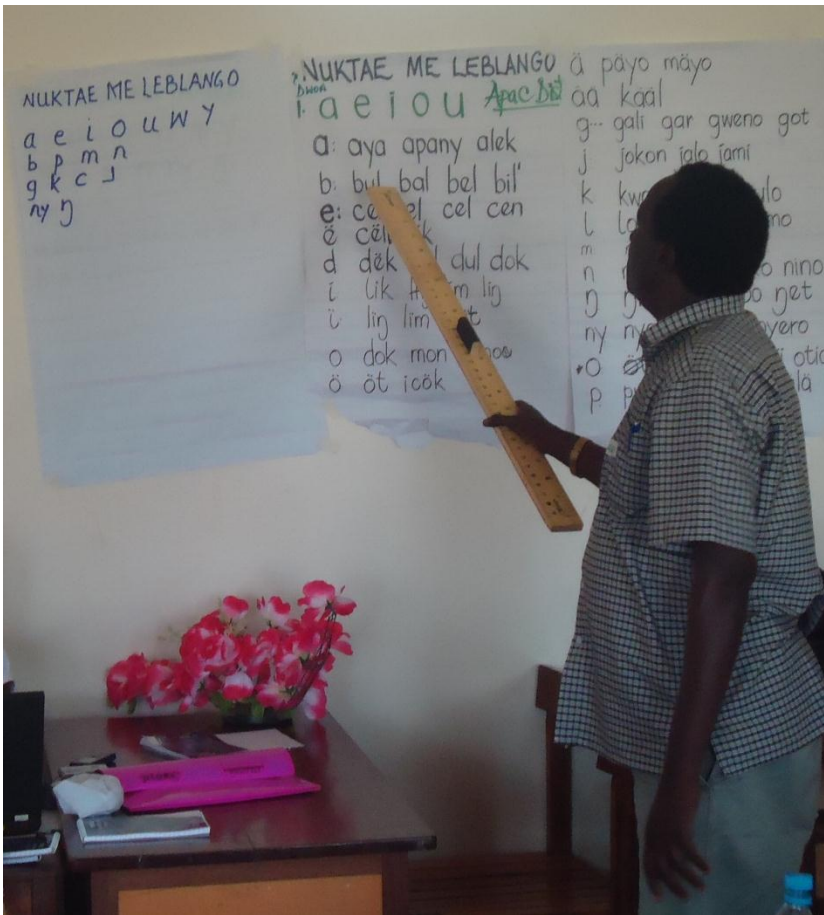
Since they join school with an oral foundation in their language, we should provide early exposure to reading - at the right time, in the right measure, in the right manner.

Every child can and should learn to read, but they must be taught.

How do we make it happen?

1. Reading taught in a familiar tongue

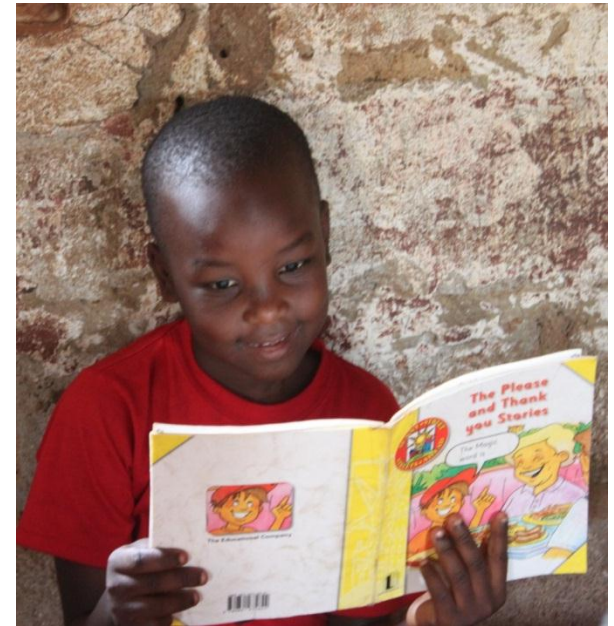
- A familiar language is used to facilitate childrens' ability to learn to read as well as their ability to learn another language and other subjects.
- L1 reading mastery cements the cognitive development that is needed to learn L2 as many key reading skills are transferrable from one language to another.
- Children use their knowledge of vocabulary, linguistic construction of language and ability to pronounce sounds to decode and ultimately comprehend text.



How do we make it happen?

2. Appropriate text provided to support learning

- LL and English primers are provided for every learner to ensure “eyes on text” every day.
- Texts for learners are age and grade level appropriate.
- Texts provide the opportunity for learners to apply what they have learned, gradually increasing their ability to read more letters, words and extended text.



How do we make it happen?

3. More time devoted to reading instruction

- Reading instruction starts early and happens everyday.
- Teachers maximize the amount of time spent on reading.
- Specific time is dedicated for reading instruction.
- Children have ample time to have their 'eyes on text', for practice.
- Time for reading extends beyond the classroom and a culture of reading is fostered in homes and communities.



How do we make it happen?

4. Effective teaching methodologies instituted



- Teachers are supported to learn the components of reading and effective practices for teaching each component.
- They learn simple yet effective teaching practices and instructional routines that motivate children, and formative feedback and scaffolding.
- They are supported with explicit lesson plans, regular mentoring, coaching and support supervision.

How do we make it happen?

5. Regular testing conducted to assess learning progress

- Teachers should assess children's learning by appropriate methods.
- Continuous assessment results must be ploughed back into instruction to respond to learners' needs.
- Targeted assessments such as EGRA help identify which skills need reinforcement and can directly inform teaching and learning.



Is anything left for anyone to pick up?

Yes, a lot. Central governments have a responsibility to shift from tokenism to business in:

- i. framing and articulating mother-tongue education policies based on sound theory;
- ii. budgets to support development and production of LL medium and transitional English instructional materials;
- iii. investing in teacher and supervisor training and professional development programs;
- iv. follow-up classroom support for teachers, and
- v. increasing the currency of LLs by widening the domains of use.

Is anything left for anyone to pick up?

Yes, a lot. Communities and CSOs should demand for teaching and learning effectiveness through:

- i. leveraging schools' efforts to implement LL based instruction policies;
- ii. lobbying governments for bilingual programs;
- iii. lobbying for review of high stake examinations that glorify memorization at the expense of assessment that could enfranchise the marginalized learner, and
- iv. sensitizing society about the glory of white collar jobs.

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