

# The Language Policy of Education in Ghana: A Critical Look at the English-Only Language Policy of Education

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## 1. Introduction

The language of education in multilingual societies has always been a matter of concern to educators and educational planners. As Ouadraogo (2000, p. 89) has pointed out “Education and language issues are very complex in Africa because of the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual situation”. The situation is even more severe when the official language of the nation is different from any of the indigenous languages. There is always controversy over which language to use in school especially at the lower primary level in multilingual societies. Forty-eight years after independence, Ghana is still grappling with which language to use as the medium of instruction in the lower primary school (primary one to three/grade one to three). The language policy of education in Ghana has had a checkered history since the colonial era. In May 2002, Ghana promulgated a law, which mandates the use of English language (hereafter L2) as the medium of instruction from primary one (grade one) to replace the use of a Ghanaian language as the medium of instruction for the first three years of schooling, and English as the medium of instruction from primary four (grade four). This new policy has attracted a lot of criticism from a section of academics, politicians, educators, traditional rulers, and the general populace. This paper looks briefly at the historical development of educational language policy in Ghana, examines what necessitated the change in policy, and responds to issues raised. The paper then argues for the reversal of the new policy and proposes the implementation of a late-exit transitional bilingual education model.

## 2. Language policy of education in Ghana: Historical overview

The controversy about the language to use as the medium of instruction in Ghanaian schools, especially at the lower basic level dates back to the castle schools and missionary era. Before formal education was introduced into Ghana in the name of *white love* (Spring, 1998), traditional education was conducted in the indigenous languages. With the inception of formal education and the subsequent use of English as the medium of instruction, the indigenous languages were seen as “inadequate” as teaching media (Bamgbose, 2000). Bilingual education in Ghana commenced with the inception of formal education in Ghana which began with the castle schools and was later continued by the Christian missionaries. This period is the pre-colonial period (1529-1925). The languages used were those of the home country (the metropolitan languages). Portuguese, Dutch, Danish and English were used as media of instruction wherever and whenever the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Danes and the English respectively were in power. The situation, however, changed with the arrival of the missionaries, who resorted to the development of the local languages in both their educational and proselytizing efforts. The Basel and Bremen missionaries were more successful in this area than the Wesleyans (Graham, 1971). The language policies during this period were as varied as they were independent (Andoh-Kumi, 1994).

The use of a Ghanaian language during the period from 1529 to 1925 had gained root to the extent that when the British colonial government took over the administration of education in the country in 1925, it could not reverse the trend (Bamgbose, 2000). During this period, a systematic pattern began

to emerge with regard to both education and language use. The first legislation on the use of a Ghanaian language in education was promulgated (MacWilliam, 1969; Graham, 1971; Gbedemah, 1975). Ghanaian language was to be used as the medium of instruction only at the lower primary level, with English used thereafter. The policy was reversed and became unstable when the administration of the country came under the jurisdiction of indigenous Ghanaians in 1957. Since then, the use of a Ghanaian language as the medium of instruction at the lower primary level has had a checkered history. From 1925 to 1951, a Ghanaian language was used as medium of instruction for the first three years. Between 1951 and 1956, it was used only for the first year. From 1957 to 1966 a Ghanaian language was not used at all, from 1967 to 1969 it was used only for the first year, and between 1970 and 1974 a Ghanaian language was used for the first three years and where possible beyond (to the sixth year). From 1974 to 2002 a Ghanaian language was used for the first three years. A Ghanaian language in this case is the language of the locality which includes one of the following: Akan (Fante and Twi), Nzema, Ga, Ga-Adangbe, Ewe, Gonja, Kasem, Dagbani, and Dagaare.

*Table 1: A diagrammatic representation of the policy from the pre-colonial era to the present (1529-2002).*

PERIOD	1 <sup>st</sup> YEAR	2 <sup>nd</sup> YEAR	3 <sup>rd</sup> YEAR	4 <sup>th</sup> YEAR +
<b>1529-1925</b>				
<b>a. Castle Schools Era</b>	-	-	-	-
<b>b. Missionary Era</b>	+	+	+	-
<b>1925-1951</b>	+	+	+	-
<b>1951- 1955</b>	+	-	-	-
<b>1956- 1966</b>	-	-	-	-
<b>1967- 1969</b>	+	-	-	-
<b>1970- 1973</b>	+	+	+	+
<b>1974-2002 (Sept)</b>	+	+	+	-
<b>Present</b>	-	-	-	-

Key: + = A Ghanaian language was used as the medium of instruction.  
 - = Ghanaian not used

At present, the policy states that English should be used as the medium of instruction from primary one, with a Ghanaian language studied as a compulsory subject to the Senior Secondary School (High School) (Ameyaw-Akumfi, 2002). The government on 15th August, 2002 approved this policy to be implemented in September 2002. Since the announcement of the change of policy, the debate over the language of education has picked up momentum from academics, politicians, educators, educational planners, traditional rulers, and the general populace.

Ghana has been a strong advocate of the African personality since Nkrumah's era. The promulgation of the use of English as the medium of instruction in education and the abandoning of her indigenous languages in education is therefore in opposition to this ideology. Unlike most Francophone countries which had French forced on them as medium of instruction through the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 and made the use of local languages in schools forbidden (Djite, 2000), Ghana had the British lay a solid foundation for the use of the indigenous languages as media of instruction at the lower primary level. For example, Cote d'Ivoire prior to independence in 1960 entered into an agreement with France to maintain the cultural and linguistic policies of their colonizers (Djite, 2000). Ghana unlike most Francophone countries has come a long way in the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction. The country's recent turn towards the "Francophone phenomenon" is saddening and baffling. The multimillion-dollar question is what necessitated the change of policy.

### 3. Why the change in the language policy?

The use of the child's primary language in education at least the early stages has been theoretically and empirically confirmed to be beneficial. There is a plethora of evidence for the use of L1 in education but Ghana for a number of reasons has decided to espouse an English only language policy in its education. The reasons given include the following (source: *The Statesman*, Thursday July 16, 2002):

1. The previous policy of using a Ghanaian language as medium of instruction in the lower primary level was abused, especially in rural schools. Teachers never spoke English in class even in primary six.
2. Students are unable to speak and write 'good' English sentences even by the time they complete the Senior Secondary School (High School).
3. The multilingual situation in the country especially in urban schools has made instruction in a Ghanaian language very difficult. The source added that a study conducted by the Ministry of Education showed that 50 to 60 percent of children in each class in the urban area speak a different language. "It is therefore problematic if we insist that all the children be instructed in Ga, Twi, or Dagbani depending on whether it is Accra, Kumasi or Tamale".
4. There is a lack of materials in the Ghanaian languages to be used in teaching. The minister of Education declared that "Only five, out of the languages that are spoken by our major ethnic groups, have material developed on them. Certainly, we cannot impose these five languages on the entire nation and people of other ethnic origins".
5. There is a lack of Ghanaian language teachers specifically trained to teach content subjects in the Ghanaian language. The minister added "merely being able to speak a Ghanaian language does not mean one can teach in it".
6. There is no standard written form of the Ghanaian languages. He says "For nearly all the languages that we have, there is hardly any standard written form".
7. The minister in order to support the claim for the use of English as the medium of instruction from primary one cited an experiment by Rockwell (1989) and indicated that children transfer from L2 to L1 better.
8. The minister pointed out that English is the lingua franca of the state and that all effort must be put in to ensure that children acquire the right level of competence in both the spoken and written forms of the language.

### 4. Reaction to the reasons for the change of policy

The reasons given by the Minister of Education for the change in policy are tangible and represent the harsh realities on the ground. The most challenging of the problems raised, which seems insurmountable but can be dealt with when there is proper planning, is the multilingual nature of the nation and its classrooms. This issue will be briefly discussed in the latter part of the paper but it is something which requires much attention. The others are lapses in the policy and lack of proper planning and implementation. The main reason for the change of policy is that our students are performing abysmally in English and in other subject areas because of the use of Ghanaian language as the medium of instruction. However, since 1987 there have been educational reviews and interventions like the FCUBE (Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education) and the 2002 Presidential Education Committee, and none has identified the use of a Ghanaian language as a medium of instruction as the source of poor performance in schools, especially at the Basic level. Rather, the reports of such reviews call for the strengthening of the use of the native languages in schools (Ministry of Education 1996, 2003).

Terminating the policy of using a Ghanaian language as the medium of instruction is an unscientific way of ameliorating the problems of the old policy. Ghana promulgated an English only policy during Kwame Nkrumah's era (1957 – 1966) but that was when students' English language proficiency fell below the adopted threshold (Andoh-Kumi, 1994). The problem is not with the policy but its implementation. We have not provided our teachers and learners with the needed resources to teach and learn the English language. According to Carroll (1962), a program, which ensures success

in L2 provides quality instruction and enough opportunities for learning the language, which includes adequate time. Krashen and Terrell (1983) for example, identified the constant use of the target language by the instructor in the teaching/learning process as a factor in enhancing their proficiency in the language. As a nation, we have not trained teachers to teach English as a foreign language in a meaningful way and use it for academic purposes in a way that could lead to maximum returns.

The reason given by the minister that there is a lack of textbooks and other materials in the Ghanaian language to facilitate teaching and learning is not peculiar to the Ghanaian language. Most Schools in Ghana are functioning without textbooks and other teaching and learning materials. Sometimes a class of fifty learners has only two English textbooks. How do our kids learn to read and improve their English proficiency when there are no textbooks?

The statement by the Minister of Education that there is hardly any standard written form in the various Ghanaian languages is fallacious and unfortunate. The ten Ghanaian languages, which have officially been recognized by the government and used in schools, are studied as undergraduate and graduate courses. For example, the University of Ghana, Legon and the University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast offer a graduate degree program in Akan (Twi and Fante), Ga and Ewe, whereas the University of Education, Winneba offers undergraduate courses in Akan (Twi and Fante), Ewe, Nzema, Ga, Ga-Adamgbe, Gonja, Dagaare, Dagbani, Kasem, and Gurune. As far back as the 1930s, Twi, Fante, Ga, and Ewe were General Certificate Ordinary Level (GCE 'O' Level) examination subjects and were counted towards exemption from the matriculation examination of the University of London (Andoh-Kumi 1994). The government must provide funds for the corpus development of these languages to incorporate technical and scientific terms into the various Ghanaian languages and also develop the written forms of the less developed ones.

The claim by the minister that children can transfer from L2 to L1 is very intriguing. How can our children transfer from L2 to L1 when they have not mastered the L1 effectively and do not have competent teachers in the L2 to teach them to transfer? Transferring from L1 to L2 is theoretically and empirically more probable. The L1 serves as background knowledge, preexisting knowledge upon which inferences and predictions can be made to facilitate transfer (Saville-Troike, 1988). Krashen (1990), for example, notes that when schools provide children with quality education in their primary language, they give them knowledge and literacy, and the knowledge they have gained in L1 helps them make the English they hear and read more comprehensible. In my opinion, it is easier and more cost effective to invest in L1 to promote transfer to L2 than it is to do the opposite. As Hakuta (1990) points out, native language proficiency is a strong indicator of second language development.

The claim that the multilingual nature of the nation, especially in urban centers, has made the old policy non-implementable is a sign of shortsightedness. The linguistic diversity of our classrooms should not be seen as a threat to mother tongue instruction and unity in the classroom but as something that supports and strengthens our goal as educators. Educators should therefore affirm, accept and respond to the importance of children's native languages as media of instruction. It must be noted that mother tongue education is a right as well as a need for every child (Pattanayak, 1986). We cannot deny our learners language rights and claim to give them fundamental rights. Rights without language rights are vacuous. Language Rights + Human rights = Linguistic human rights. Denying the Ghanaian child the use of his/her native language in education is committing the crime of "linguistic genocide" in education (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). There should be a starting point for a search for the best choice among alternatives. Using English is definitely not the best alternative.

## **5. Why underachievement in Ghanaian schools?**

The use of the child's first language in education has been shown to enhance the academic, linguistic, and cognitive achievement of learners (Baker, 2001). The issue of underachievement/low academic performance, especially in English language in Ghanaian schools despite the use of the child's L1 at the lower primary level, needs to be investigated. Merely using the child's L1 in education does not guarantee any of the benefits mentioned above. It depends on an effective and well planned program in which proficiency in the first language is developed and attained. According to

Lewelling (1991), the level of first language proficiency has a direct influence on second language development and cognitive academic growth.

One reason that makes students underachieve despite starting their education in L1 is the type of bilingual education model practiced. The type of bilingual education that was practiced in Ghana before the change of policy was the early-exit transition model. To restate the policy, a Ghanaian language was used as the medium of instruction at the lower primary level (P1-3/Grade 1-3) and English as the medium of instruction from class four (Grade 4). At the lower primary level, English was taught as a subject. In my opinion, besides the teacher factor, lack of materials, lack of supervision, and lack of exposure to the target language, two main factors worked against the model, and this may explain why the Ghanaian child is performing abysmally in English language in particular, and in the academic subjects in general. In the first place, learners were prematurely transitioned into the use of English as medium of instruction, and second, the transitional process was abrupt.

Second language acquisition research has shown that the level of proficiency in the L1 has a direct influence on the development of proficiency in the second language and that a disruption in first language development has been found, in some cases, to inhibit second language proficiency and cognitive growth (Lewelling, 1991). Saville-Troike (1984) for example, asserts that in almost all cases, a student's relative competence in the native language coincides with the student's relative achievement in English (L2). Benson in two experimental studies of bilingual education in Guinea-Bissau (Benson, 1994) and in Mozambique (Benson, 2000) noted that students in the bilingual program performed better when tested in the second language than their monolingual counterparts.

The use of a Ghanaian language as the medium of instruction in the early-exit transitional model is too short-term for children to understand the complex workings of their L1 for them to transfer it effectively and efficiently to the L2. At this stage they have not crossed the threshold where competence in the L1 carries over to the L2. The thresholds theory indicates that "when there is a low level of competence in both languages, there may be negative or detrimental cognitive effects" (Baker 2001, p. 167). The old language policy produced children in this category, which may help to explain the low academic performance among learners. There is therefore, the need to embark on a late-exit transitional model, which will make learners 'balanced bilinguals'; competent in both the Ghanaian language and English. This is supported by the work of Cummins and Mulcahy (1978) who contend that the child's advancement towards balanced bilingualism has a probable cognitive advantage. The prolongitivity of L1 use in schools will enhance the learning of the L2.

We need to fashion a language policy model that will nurture the learners well into an advanced grade where they would have matured in age and in the L1. According to Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978), the older the age of the learner, the better they learn the second language because they have achieved a high level of cognitive maturity in the L1. They add that cognitive maturity, knowledge, and experience in the L1 transfers to the L2. Hovens (2002) in a study of experimental bilingual programs in Guinea-Bissau and Niger (West Africa) found that students in the bilingual programs had better school results especially in language subjects. They indicated that this is true when the second language (French) is not introduced too abruptly or too early. Again there are strong arguments for the introduction of the late-exit model of transitional bilingual education.

The old policy, which terminated the use of the native language at year three and resurrected the use of English in the fourth year, was very abrupt. Where is the bridge for the cross over? Metaphorically, it is like jumping over a trench when you have little or no to execute the task. This is where the disaster begins. The transitioning process must be gradual. In Krashen's (1999) view, the "gradual exit" model is a way of organizing a bilingual program that ensures effective cognitive and academic achievement, and proficiency in the second language. It makes instruction in the second language at later stages more comprehensible to learners. As a result, as Thomas and Collier (1997) found, students in a late-exit [gradual exit] transitional bilingual program perform well ahead (in English achievement) of their early-exit counterparts. Likewise, in a national study to assess the long-term academic achievement of language minority students in bilingual programs in five school districts in the United States, Thomas and Collier (2002) observed that "the greater the number of years of primary language, grade-level schooling a student has received, the greater his/her English

achievement is shown to be.” (p. 2). They also found that initially the all-English language program students outperform the bilingual students in English, but at the high school level the tide turns.

The Threshold theory (Cummins 1976; Toukoma and Skutnabb-Kangas 1977) states that the student’s level of language competence has implications for the child. The theory holds that there is a level of L1 proficiency that a child needs to attain to avoid the negative consequences of using two languages. This suggests that if the child is prematurely transitioned into L2, detrimental consequences may be experienced. The implications of the threshold theory and the studies indicated above in my view are that a late exit-transitional bilingual education model should be adopted in Ghana.

## 6. The alternative solution and the way forward

As an alternative to the English only policy, I will propose late-exit transitional bilingual education as a modification to the old language policy. The transitional bilingual education (TBE) program proposed here is based on the late-exit TBE model of Ramirez and Merino (1990). Late-exit transitional bilingual education according to the authors allows for about forty percent (40%) use of the mother tongue in teaching until the sixth year (Grade 6) of schooling. In the Ghanaian context, this means the mother tongue will be used as the medium of instruction from Primary 1 to Primary 4 while English is gradually introduced into the system as the medium of instruction from Primary 5 and finally becomes the medium of instruction from Primary 6 onwards. From primary one to four, English will be a subject of study and from Primary 6, Ghanaian language will be studied as a core subject up to the end of the Junior Secondary School and continue to be a core subject to the end of the Senior Secondary School program.

A Ghanaian language is used as the medium of instruction up until the fourth year because by then it is anticipated that the child would have had enough L1 background to help transfer gradually into English. Mathematics and integrated science are taught in the L1 until primary five because they are abstract and need a familiar language for learners to understand and appreciate their value. Environmental studies, physical education, and religious and moral education are instructed in English from Primary 5 because the learners have sufficient background experience in these areas from their community/culture. The study of a second Ghanaian language in the Junior Secondary School is a start towards learners becoming bilingual in Ghanaian languages.

*Table 2: The late-exit TBE program*

Class	Ghanaian language	English
P1-P4	All Core Subjects	English language
P5	Ghanaian language and culture, Music and Dance, and Integrated Science, Mathematics	English language, Environmental studies, P.E., Religious/ Moral Education
P6	Ghanaian language and culture, Music and Dance	English language, Environmental studies, P.E., Religious/ Moral Education, Integrated Science, Mathematics
JSS1-3	Ghanaian language and culture, Second Ghanaian language	All Core Subjects

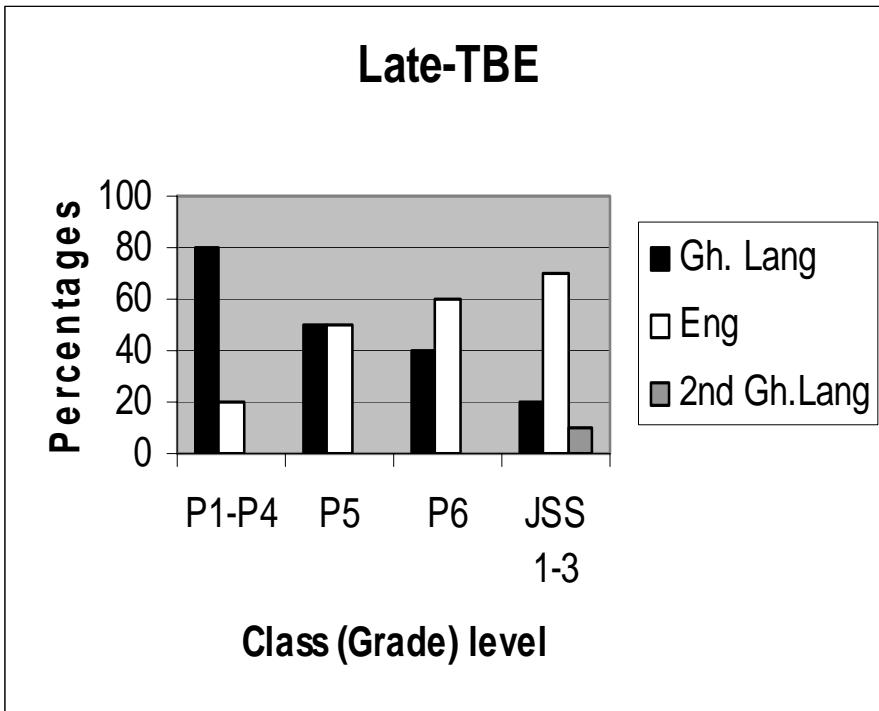
The above model is expected to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Bridge the gap between the home and the school to help children overcome initial social adjustment problems in school.
2. Make learners literate in both languages (Ghanaian language and English).

3. Give learners the needed exposure in the L1 to make them “balanced bilinguals” so that they can develop cognitively and academically and transfer the language skills acquired in the L1 to L2 (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1977; Cummins, 1976).
4. Make learners appreciate their culture so that they can understand and appreciate the culture of the L2.
5. Make the learner bilingual in two Ghanaian languages.

The proportional use of a Ghanaian language and English as the media of instruction in the proposed model is presented in the graph below:

*Table 3: The percentage use of Ghanaian language and English as media of instruction at the Basic level in the proposed model.*



## 7. Ensuring the success of the model

The planning and implementation of the model should follow the bottom-up approach (Rubin, 1983; Bolman & Deal, 2003). The planning will begin with fact-finding (Rubin, 1983; Bamgbose, 1989) to identify which languages are spoken at which locality. There will be a decision making process which will involve teachers, learners, parents, and language coordinators to select a language convenient for a school in the case of schools with two or more Ghanaian languages represented. This implies that a school will be empowered to select one or more Ghanaian languages to use as media of instruction. This is similar to South Africa where, the constitution mandates schools through their governing bodies to stipulate how they will use the languages (Kamwangamalu, 2004). The education of teachers, parents, and all stakeholders on the policy and the benefits of bilingual education to the learner, the community, and the entire nation will be given high priority. At this stage, strategies will be drawn and roles assigned to ensure effective implementation of the policy.

The second stage will be human resource development. We need to invest in teachers by training them for the task ahead. Bolman and Deal (2003, p. 129) say that “many successful organizations have embraced creative and powerful ways to align individual and organizational needs. All these reflect the human resource frame’s core assumption by viewing the workforce as an investment rather than cost.”

Human resource development is very essential in the success of the program. This will include the training and retraining of teachers in the use of Ghanaian language as the medium of instruction and teaching English as a second language. Teachers need to be trained to write materials in their local languages and be able to evaluate the program as an ongoing practice. Capable parents and other members of the community will also be trained as bilingual aides to assist learners whose L1 is not the majority language of the locality. Learning a second Ghanaian language will be an integral part of the teacher preparation process.

One important area in ensuring the success of the program is monitoring (supervision) and evaluation. This will involve all stakeholders in the program and a bottom-up approach. At the school level there will be a language committee and a language coordinator who will supervise and monitor language issues in the school. Their main function is to ensure that language problems are resolved, and also assist teachers in developing appropriate strategies and materials. The language coordinator serves as a counselor to the teachers in terms of language use in the school. There will be district and regional language coordinators who will supervise and monitor language teaching at the district and regional levels respectively. The regional coordinator heads the Regional Language Advisory Board which deals with language issues in the region. At the national level, there will be a National Language Advisory Board on education which will advise the Ghana Education Service (GES) on issues relating to educational language policy. At the governmental level there will be a National Language Council (NLC) which will advise the government on language planning and policy implementation. They will in coordination with the National Language Advisory Board initiate laws that will strengthen and protect the use of local languages in education and in the country.

The success of this model will hinge on other factors like change of attitude, and governmental support. The negative attitude towards the use of Ghanaian language as medium of instruction and subject of study must change. Ghanaian language usage and study must be given a new perspective. The erroneous impression that education in a local language other than English is inferior must be discarded from the minds of the people through intensive education on the benefits of using the child's first language in education. The use of Ghanaian language as medium of instruction must have constitutional backing as done in South Africa, and the government should be held accountable for any breach of contract. For example, in South Africa the 1996 constitution mandates the use of eleven official languages and as media of instruction (Kamwangamalu, 2004). The government should provide funds for the establishment of regional language centers to ensure corpus development in the language, and conduct language research. There should be the empowerment of an establishment like the Bureau of Ghana Languages to publish Ghanaian language textbooks and materials which most profit-oriented publishing houses will not sponsor because of limited marketability for Ghanaian language textbooks.

In addition, the posting of teachers at the primary level should take into consideration the first and second Ghanaian languages of the teacher. The multilingual nature of Ghana and its multilingual classrooms, especially in the urban centers, demands that bilingual aides be trained. In schools where there are minority language learners in relation to the Ghanaian language of the locality and lessons are conducted in the local language, the bilingual aides will be present in classrooms to explain lessons to minority language learners who have problems understanding the lesson.

## **8. Conclusion**

UNESCO (1953) affirms that the use of L1 in education is psychologically, sociologically, and educationally beneficial to learners and that every effort should be made to provide education in the L1. To ensure freedom and human dignity for all Ghanaians and ensure that the democratic rights of all citizens are extended to the language of education, the government must rescind its decision and make the Ghanaian language the medium of instruction at least to the Grade 6 level. The poor academic performance in Ghanaian schools, especially in English proficiency, is not caused by the use of Ghanaian language as medium of instruction at the lower primary level, as erroneously perceived by many. The question of underachievement is complex, involving a number of factors. Several factors interact together to produce an effect. Baker (2001) cites socioeconomic factors as one

probable cause of underachievement and this must be investigated in the Ghanaian situation. Therefore, to single out the use of Ghanaian language as the medium of instruction in schools as the cause of poor academic performance on the part of learners and therefore call for its abolishment is an unfortunate and thoughtless solution to the problem. The Ghanaian child is not doing well in school despite bilingual education because, besides other things, the child's foundation in the local language is not well laid for transfer to the second language. Saville-Troike (1988) asserts that learners can transfer from L1 to L2 and other academic subjects when there is a preexisting knowledge base for making inferences and predictions. I recommend the reinforcement of Ghanaian language use in school as the medium of instruction by implementing the late-exit transitional bilingual education however, more needs to be done in the areas of training highly motivated teachers, providing effective supervision, providing educational materials, providing parental and community involvement in education, and formulating sound language and educational policies.

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