

Namibia: A Case for a Gradual Transitional Bilingual Language Programme

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1. Introduction

Namibia is a relative small country on the southwestern part of Africa just north west of South Africa. Namibia has a population of just over 1,7 million people and became independent from South Africa in 1990.

Although a mere 0,8% of the population are in fact first language speakers of English, English was chosen by SWAPO (Southwest Africa People's Organisation), the ruling party, as the official language after Namibia's independence in 1990 for various reasons that are outlined in *Towards a language policy for Namibia* (UNIN, 1981). This was overall not an unpopular choice. This decision was outlined Article 3 (Language) in the *Constitution (MIB 1990:3)* and also in *The Language Policy for Schools 1992 – 1996 – and beyond (MEC 1993)*.

The “African Languages” and English as the official language for Namibia were already recognised as equal in status in 1980 at a conference held in Lusaka at the United Nations Institute for Namibia (UNIN 1981). These languages can be seen as the two focal points around which language planning in education has operated in Namibia.

My work at the Directorate of National Examinations and Assessment of the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture concerns the daily assessment of learners and our workday is spent on ongoing engagement with how learners learn, how successful they are in learning and how learning can best be evaluated. The results of the language policy are reflected in the performance of the learners in the external assessment in Grade 10 and 12. I observed that the learners were not performing as well as expected and it seemed that they were struggling with the new medium of instruction.

My study took the National Language Policy as point of departure to demonstrate the role that this policy plays in facilitating learning in the classroom. The focus was thus on the way English as medium of instruction is implemented, particular in the Upper Primary phase (Grades 4 – 7).

The following questions were very important to my research:

- Does the current Language policy make learning possible?
- Do most teachers have the confidence and proper English language proficiency to teach in English as medium of instruction?
- To what degree does Namibian teachers revert to mother tongue as medium of instruction when they teach to express themselves?
- Will a bilingual language policy, where both English and the mother tongue are used, as medium of instruction, be able to improve the learner's proficiency in English?

2. Background

Throughout our country's history the medium of instruction played a major role. During the pre-independence era the target language of learning (Afrikaans) undermined the self-concept and cognitive growth of the African language speakers. From this era the notion was born that the African languages are deficient and resistance built up against the notion of mother tongue as medium of instruction in education. Among African language speakers, the notion that English was the key to empowerment therefore grew ever stronger (Heugh 1995:43).

After independence in 1990, the Ministry of Basic Education realised that a new language policy for schools was urgently needed. This policy had to promote the use of the mother tongue and English

in schools and in teacher training colleges. As a result, the document *The language policy for schools: 1992 – 1996 and beyond* (MEC 1993) was formulated and implemented. The national language policy for schools in Namibia (MEC 1993) stipulates that the medium of instruction in Grades 1 – 3, the Junior Primary phase, should be the mother tongue and English will be taught as a subject and from Grade 4 onwards the medium of instruction should change to solely English.

The Namibian language policy as published (MEC 1993) is a combination of an additive and subtractive model of language in education policy. During the initial implementation, the policy followed a gradual transition or late-exit language programme. Currently, it is a subtractive or early-exit language programme.

This policy was not explicit in its guidelines on how the different mother tongues should be used in schools. The policy mainly spelt out how the phasing in of English as medium of instruction between 1992 and 1996 should be achieved. In the draft language policy for schools and colleges of education (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture [MBESC] 2001:3) that was a result of the conference proceedings, the implementation of the first policy was criticised in the following way:

There were discrepancies in the implementation of the language policy from region to region, as policy implementers, due to misinterpretation and manipulation, mainly preferred teaching through English rather than through the mother tongue. Formerly disadvantaged learners were further marginalized in this process, as non-English speaking teachers were expected to teach through the medium of English.

There is some disjuncture between the criteria and the goals of the policy in that the criteria do not spell out that it is not permissible for a school to use the mother tongue as medium of instruction up to Grade 6 or 7. Although the language policy states that the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction in Grades 1 to 3 there is a provision that allows schools to opt out, if the necessary resources are not available. The policy also lacks discussion of the role of education promoting language and cultural identity through the mother tongue. Some education planners and parents adhered to the assumption that the earlier a child is confronted with a foreign language (English), the sooner the language will be mastered and therefore many Namibian primary schools opted for English as medium of instruction from Grade 1.

There is no unanimity among Namibians regarding mother tongue being used as medium of instruction, if the opinion of the different regions can be interpreted as a tendency. It is important to note, that for example, people living in the rural areas are more in favour of their mother tongue being used as medium of instruction than people living in urban areas (Legère 1995:132– 293)

It is also interesting to note that in the more homogeneous regions, more than 80% of lower primary schools have an African language, the inhabitants' home language, as medium of instruction. This is the case in the Caprivi, Rundu and the Ondangwa regions (MBEC 1999).

According to informal statistics obtained from the Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) division of the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, most of the schools in the Keetmanshoop region (south) have either Afrikaans (approximately 52%) or Khoekogowab (34%) as medium of instruction. Where Afrikaans is the medium of instruction, it does not necessarily mean that all learners have Afrikaans as their home language.

Percentage-wise, the Windhoek (at approximately 51%) and Khorixas (approximately 38%) regions have most of the schools that use English as medium of instruction from Grade 1. In both regions there are also a few schools that offer two languages as medium of instruction using two streams. Most of the schools in the Windhoek region using English as medium of instruction are situated in urban Windhoek.

Windhoek is considered a multi-ethnic city, in that members of all ethnic groups in Namibia live here. The general perception of people is that jobs are supposed to be easily available in the city. Thus there is a migration from every region of Namibia to the city. In Windhoek one therefore finds large numbers of Oshiwambo language speakers, but the fact is that none of these bigger African languages, for example Oshindonga and Oshikwanyama, are used as medium of instruction in any of the schools in the Windhoek region. This situation should be of major concern to the parents for the only alternative they have is to enrol their children in schools that use English as medium of instruction, since they have no other choice. This in itself diminishes the status of African languages even further (Namibia Educational Research Association [NERA] 2000).

One of the reason why principals opt for English as medium of instruction from Grade 1 is that there are too many speakers of different languages in one school to select any one language as the medium of instruction from. A different picture emerges when one look at the available statistics. In 1998 there were 295 lower primary schools in the Keetmanshoop, Khorixas and Windhoek regions. In 20% of these 295 schools, 70% of the learners shared the same home language (NIED 2000).

In some multilingual schools, the school management has decided that it is fairer to have a 'neutral' language (English), so that the speakers of minority languages will not be disadvantaged if the language of the largest number of learners is used. It was found that in some schools where there is one dominant language, the speakers of the minority languages are assimilated into the dominant language group. This argument is also not valid for English as medium of instruction, in that most communities in Namibia use very little English outside the school (Trewby 1999:4). It is not as if the management of the school has made this decision without the consent of the parents, but because there are so many parents who are still illiterate, there is no doubt that the school management and the school board, whom the parents regard as competent to make these decisions for them, influence them. Another factor in decision-making is that parental involvement in most schools is either very limited or non-existent.

I have already mentioned that people have the perception that African languages have no use. This negative attitude can be traced back to the history of education in this country. Perhaps even more important is the attitude of politicians towards the status of the African languages. Most educated people and people of relative importance, such as politicians, put their children in schools where English is the medium of instruction. Indeed, unless politicians take a stand to enforce the use of mother tongue in the first three years of school, African languages may never have the status they deserve in terms of the Constitution and current language policy.

Many learners fail to attain the minimum language proficiency in English before the introduction of linguistically (and thereby cognitively) more demanding, English-medium subjects in Grade 4. It is often the case that they do not reach the minimum level of English language proficiency required when they enter the Junior Secondary phase of school, at which time they should really be functioning at an intermediate level. As a result of problems beginning at primary school, learners continue to lag behind their required level of language proficiency and the majority never really reach the language proficiency in English which their age and school level demand (Jones 1996:285).

In a recent investigation at one of the schools in Windhoek where 204 Grade 8 learners' literacy and numeracy skills level were tested, shocking figures came to light. It was found that 22,4% of those learners were not functionally literate in English and only marginally skilled to a Grade 6 level. Furthermore, 49,2% learners' numeracy skills were lower than Grade 7 level. An interesting fact is that these learners whom did not achieve the required literacy or numeracy level for Grade 8, come from schools where English and not the mother tongue was chosen as the medium of instruction from Grade 1.

After considering the above-mentioned factors regarding the actual choice of medium of instruction in the lower primary phase, as well as the status of African languages in all phases, one realises that the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture is faced with a dilemma. The national languages simply do not have the desired equal status in Namibian education, and this is an historical given.

The dilemma is not only the problem of the Ministry, but of the whole country. According to the Constitution, all languages should be regarded as equal. As we have seen, the real situation does not reflect this. The dilemma is whether there is a way to help all African languages to acquire the status and place they deserve in education and in the everyday life of Namibians. A major stumbling block, and one that needs to be tested empirically to confirm the anecdotal evidence in this regard, may be attitudes towards African languages and the parents' preference for English as medium of instruction in the first three years of school.

The important questions that should be asked about this situation are: Is there a way to improve the current situation regarding the language policy in Namibian schools? Will all the stakeholders be determined to help change the current situation? Is there a feeling of complacency and indifference, or a component of ignorance amongst the community towards these issues? Are there alternative avenues to pursue that would help education to escape from the historically recurrent dilemmas in language policy and practice?

The current language policy clearly states that mother tongue instruction will be in the best interests of the learner, especially in the first three grades of school. However, the policy leaves room for misinterpretation by stating that: “Grades 1-3 be taught either through the home language, a local language or English” (MEC 1991:3). The choice of the medium of instruction is therefore decentralised, and some schools in urban areas are opting for English as medium of instruction from Grade 1. This poses a further problem, since not all teachers are competent in English.

It is not uncommon among Namibians to find people who have changed their home language to English because they believe it is to the benefit of their children. Yet English is the first language of only 0,8% of the population of Namibia. This means that teachers, who are not native speakers of English, teach the language in schools in Namibia. Therefore the English proficiency acquired by Namibians is in fact at a second language level. Alexander (2000: 11 & 12) argues that in order to support an education system based on English as medium of instruction, a teaching corps of native English speaking or proficient second-language speakers of the global language is needed. Conversely, this means that, as in the past, learners who are not taught by teachers proficient in English will not have the necessary foundation on which to build their English language skills. Indeed, Alexander (2000:12) is of the opinion that if learners from their first school year are taught in English by teachers not proficient in English, they will have problems in reading and writing either their home language or the language of teaching, and will therefore emerge as semilinguals.

A national census was conducted in Namibia in 2001, and it will be very interesting to see whether the number of English mother tongue speakers has increased from the 0,8% of the previous census statistics. One might safely predict that there will be an increase, because many Namibians seem to have changed their home language to English, although they are not first language speakers of English. If this indeed turns out to be the case, it will once more strengthen what Alexander has said.

3. English language proficiency of teachers

With English as official language and medium of instruction, it is important to investigate the teachers’ English language proficiency, since most teachers in Namibia went through the old system in the pre-independence era when the medium of instruction was Afrikaans. Before independence, Afrikaans was the official language, and therefore Namibians did not have to use English in their everyday life as is the case today, especially in urban centres, such as Windhoek.

The English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP 1999) conducted a national survey on the English Language proficiency of Namibian teachers in the three phases, junior primary, senior primary and junior secondary.

The results across the three phases show that the junior secondary teachers performed better than their upper primary counterparts, who in turn performed better than their lower primary colleagues.

With regard to the general language proficiency of Namibia’s teachers, it appears that Reading and Usage (Grammar) are the two weakest areas. Many of the teachers do not have a sufficiently high proficiency in reading skills to enable them to study further at a diploma or higher level.

Most teachers do not have any problems with pronunciation, vocabulary and giving instructions, but the problem areas are grammar, elicitation techniques, the use of non-verbal support (resource materials), and to explain concepts. The use of the medium of instruction, English, is a problem for teachers whose English proficiency is not very good. Pronunciation and vocabulary do not pose too big a problem, as it will not affect the learners acquiring English, but when learners are taught through the medium of an English of which the use of grammar is incorrect, it is potentially detrimental to the learners’ development.

In addition, many teachers, especially those teaching in the rural areas, have poor teaching qualifications, and they hardly ever hear or use English in their communities.

One must remember that teachers in the lower primary phase whose English language proficiency are believed to be the worst, have to prepare learners for English as medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards.

In comparing the regions, one sees that with the three northern regions, Rundu, Ondangwa East and Ondangwa West, the same picture emerges in that these three regions always perform the poorest. Teachers in these three regions are more in need of remediation than teachers in other regions.

Although the teachers of the Katima Mulilo region perform better than their colleagues in Ondangwa East and West and Rundu in certain areas, they are just as weak in areas such as reading.

The results of the Windhoek region vary considerably, which could be because of the wide range of schools, varying teaching situations across schools, and availability of resources and qualified teachers within the region.

In the Khorixas and Keetmanshoop regions, teachers seem to perform better than in the other regions, but the limited sample sizes mean that no firm conclusions could be drawn from the data.

What is clear from the above, however, is that there is a serious problem with the English language proficiency of most teachers in Namibia. Language proficiency seems to compound and exacerbate other problems in the system.

Language proficiency appears to affect examination results. Again, as is the case with other problematic components of the system, language proficiency shows up as the factor bedevilling the achievement of satisfactory outcomes.

4. Grade 10 examination results

It will be interesting to briefly compare how the results of the Grade 10 examination subjects have stabilised over the years. These results are significant for this study, since it is the effect of the language policy on examination results that ultimately determines the value of the policy.

Table 1 below shows the average percentage obtained for each subject over the past five years (1997 –2001). The Pilot Curriculum prescribes 9 subjects at Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC) level. Most of the bigger entry subjects and most of the languages are taken into consideration here, but it would be too comprehensive to include the statistics of all 36 subjects, since some of them, e.g. Music and Motor Mechanics, are taken only by a select few candidates

The reason for looking at these results is that they in fact show that, except for the languages, where the average percentage is relatively high, the results of the past five years are in fact alarming. The reason why the averages for the home languages are so high, can be attributed to the fact that candidates are instructed in a language they know best and feel comfortable with. This strengthens the point that candidates will do so much better when instructed in the language they know best. Can one of the reasons for the poor performance in the other subjects be that English is being used as medium of instruction?

There is indeed something to be said about the differences in average percentages of the first languages and the content subjects, where learners are taught through the medium of English. In some of the key subjects, the Grade 10 Examiners' Reports of 1999 (MBEC 2000) touch on the issue that language is a stumbling block for learners when answering the question papers. One sometimes wonders whether learners have really not mastered the work, or whether they simply do not understand what the examination questions require of them. We consider a few comments made by examiners in this regard:

Physical Science: “Although the majority of learners attempted to answer all questions in Paper 2, it was evident in some answers that learners misunderstood the questions. This seems to reveal the difficulty learners have in understanding the instructions and to express themselves adequately.”

History: “The majority of candidates especially those in the rural areas did not encounter problems in the paper. A large total did however have problems with English which brought about that they could not express themselves properly and could not understand what was required of them.”

Geography Paper 1: “Possible reasons for the poorer performances are:

- poor command of English with subsequent poor understanding of questions, instructions and an inability to express themselves sufficiently.”

“Poor command of English resulted in candidates not being able to write coherent, sensible sentences where they were lead (*sic*) to ‘explain’ or ‘suggest’.

Geography Paper 2: “Another contributing factor was the poor comprehension/interpretation of the questions and information and/or ignoring of instructions. This made it very difficult for the learners to express themselves, resulting in answers being completely off the point or irrelevant.”

Home Economics: “There are a lot of candidates who do not answer in clear logic (*sic*) sentences. Teachers should encourage learners to speak, read and write in correct English. They must write in full, meaningful sentences.

There was a small percentage that had difficulty in understanding and writing in English. Answers in another language than (*sic*) English have been ignored.”

Mathematics: “... it was clear that most of the candidates still have a problem with the interpretation of instructions.”

Table 1: National averages of some Grade 10 subjects

Subject	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Afrikaans L1	48,1	50,2	48,6	51,8	53,2
English L1	53,2	54,4	53,0	51,1	59,2
German L1	51,5	53,9	54,2	53,4	50,4
Khoekhoegowab	56,1	64,7	62,9	55,4	54,7
Oshikwanyama	60,6	61,8	61,0	63,5	59,9
Oshindonga	60,0	62,2	63,0	63,8	64,0
Rukwangali	61,7	66,3	62,0	68,4	65,8
Silozi	59,1	59,0	61,6	64,5	64,0
Otjiherero	55,8	57,6	54,4	57,7	55,6
Afrikaans L2	45,1	46,9	46,2	46,9	50,4
English L2	45,1	44,3	45,1	46,7	48,8
Agriculture	41,6	42,8	42,3	43,3	43,7
Mathematics	26,1	28,2	27,1	29,2	23,4
Physical Science	34,4	38,3	31,7	33,5	33,1
Life Science	43,6	43,2	45,4	47,8	43,5
Geography	28,2	30,7	33,3	33,6	32,7
History	36,4	37,8	40,5	44,0	46,4
Accounting	27,7	33,0	31,1	35,1	32,8
Business Management	30,0	34,8	34,0	37,5	39,4
Needlework and Clothing	42,2	44,6	40,5	47,6	38,4
Home Science	36,1	37,0	42,6	42,2	40,0
Woodwork	47,0	42,2	47,7	42,5	45,3
Technical Drawing	43,3	41,6	41,1	41,2	41,1
Computer Practice	44,2	48,1	45,6	46,0	48,9
Typing	36,9	35,1	35,1	37,4	39,8

(Information taken and collected from several DNEA Internal data print-outs and documents)

The point of this section, however, is that language proficiency also appears to affect examination results. Again, as is the case with other problematic components of the system, language proficiency shows up as the factor potentially bedevilling the achievement of satisfactory outcomes. Though there may be other possible explanations, language policy seems at least to be compounding the problems in what is already a difficult context.

5. Research methodology

I based my research on Cummins' linguistic interdependence principle (Cummins 1979). He says that interdependence in languages suggests the level of the second language competence a child requires, depends on the stage of development that has been reached in the first language. In other words, the development and competence in a second language is partially a function of the type of competence developed in the first language at the time when intensive exposure to the second language begins. The level of acquisition of the second language is influenced by the learner's level of development in the first language.

First and second language skills are interdependent, in other words there are some underlying cognitive/academic proficiency, which is common across languages.

I used a combination of a questionnaire and group interviews, combining these with qualitative research methodologies in order to gain meaning and a deeper understanding of how teachers and advisory teachers understand the language policy, and how they respond to questions put to them in the questionnaire and interview. A combination of open-ended and closed questions was used for the questionnaire that was completed anonymously. This was followed by a semi-structured interview. Wallace (1998: 130) observes that even if respondents fill in questionnaires anonymously, some or all of these issues can be followed up for deeper investigation. Such an in-depth investigation can explore ideas more thoroughly. This was indeed the intent of my survey.

In order to create a dynamic discussion space, I decided to make use of group interviews. Group interviews have the advantage of allowing interaction between respondents, and they can complement each other's views and opinions when discussing issues. Responses given during the interviews are useful to judge the validity of the answers in the questionnaires.

I decided to use cluster sampling, which is similar to stratified random sampling, to do the data collection. The sample comprised a total of 40 respondents (26 teachers and 14 advisory teachers), interviewed over six sessions. The teachers were all upper primary teachers and they were mostly women. Anonymity was ensured, and for this reason no distinction was made between age, sex, and region, or which classes or subjects the respondents teach.

The three educational regions chosen were Ondangwa West, Keetmanshoop and Windhoek. Ondangwa West can be seen as representative of the four northern education regions, i.e. Rundu, Katima Mulilo, Ondangwa East and West. In these regions the situation regarding the implementation of the language policy is fairly similar. In the Windhoek region most of the schools have the problem that there are learners from different cultural groups, with different mother tongues, in the same class. Most of the schools in and around Windhoek opted for English as medium of instruction from Grade 1.

I am going to focus on the following three questions from my sessions:

How much time, do you think, teachers use the mother tongue as medium of instruction in class instead of English?

Which language would you prefer your child to receive his/her education?

What is the general perception for a gradual transition bilingual language programme?

6. Findings and analysis

6.1 *The use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in class instead of English*

The intention of this question was to determine how much time teachers spend in class using the mother tongue instead of English as medium of instruction during teaching. Respondents indicated the following in the questionnaire on the use of the mother tongue during teaching in the upper primary phase:

% MT used	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
% Respondents	15,0%	20,0%	37,5%	27,5%	-

According to the respondents' opinion in the questionnaire, the mother tongue is being used 60%-80% of the time when teaching in class (more than 65% answered thus). During the interview, however, respondents insisted that most of them use mother tongue as medium of instruction 40% - 60% of the time as opposed to the 60%-80% reported in the questionnaire. This contradiction can be attributed to the fact that they do not want to acknowledge publicly how much of the mother tongue they actually use in class.

Another reason mentioned why teachers use mother tongue as the medium of instruction, is that most learners are not exposed to English either outside the classroom, or even enough in Grades 1-3, and therefore find it very difficult to understand English in Grade 4. Respondents feel it is very important that the learners must understand the work explained to them, otherwise their problems will escalate. Respondents feel that when new terminology or concepts are explained, it is important to use the mother tongue in order for the learners to understand clearly.

In Grade 4, teachers are supposed to teach through English as the medium of instruction, but, according to respondents' reports, the learners' level of understanding in English is far beyond the expected level of proficiency in English. Therefore, respondents are of the opinion that Grade 4 teachers definitely use the mother tongue as medium of instruction up to 60% of the time.

6.2 *Which language would you prefer your child to receive his/her education*

12,5% of the respondents prefer English as the medium of instruction throughout school, whereas an overwhelming 87,5% of the respondents prefers a combination of mother tongue and English as medium of instruction. Not even one respondent felt that the mother tongue as the only medium of instruction is a viable option.

According to the respondents, the mother tongue is very important in that learners are better acquainted with it and will therefore understand instructions much better. The mother tongue will also help them to master educational processes from an early age.

Another factor that they deem important is the cultural dimension, embodied in customs and traditions, which is associated with language. Every person should have such background knowledge of their language, and be taught to use it fluently, in a grammatically correct fashion.

They feel it is important for learners to master their own language and develop basic concepts in it from an early age, because they know their own language best. Through the mother tongue they can get a grip on the basics, which will help to create confidence in the learner. The most important aspect of mother tongue as the medium of instruction, according to these respondents, is for learners to master the basic competencies like reading and writing in their own language before transferring the acquired knowledge and skills to English. In this way the foundation will be laid for learners to communicate effectively through writing, and to speak more fluently in both languages.

Respondents' arguments for English as medium of instruction being introduced at a later stage include the consideration that in most areas of Namibia exposure to English outside the classroom is very limited. Parents are in many cases not able to help their children with their homework, because they themselves cannot speak the language. They feel that if the work is explained in both languages, learners will understand concepts better and feel more comfortable.

These respondents all say that the mother tongue must be the medium of instruction in Grades 1–3. What is extremely significant, however, is that they want the changeover to English as medium of instruction to happen gradually. Moreover, the mother tongue should always, in one way or the other, stay a supportive language after the medium of instruction has changed to English. Again, though, it is telling that they also feel that English should not be implemented as the medium of instruction from Grade 4 in a wholesale fashion, because it is too early and causes confusion amongst the learners, especially if it happens literally from one year to the next.

From the above it becomes clear that the respondents are in favour of a dual medium approach in which using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction provides the foundation in the first years, and English is subsequently introduced in a gradual fashion.

6.3 Outline of a possible gradual transition bilingual programme

Heugh and Siegruhn's (1995:92) remark is pertinent: education cannot be meaningful and equal when learners come to school and cannot understand or relate to the educational processes of the school. Education cannot be meaningful to learners if English is used as medium of instruction and the whole class comprises, say, Otjherero speaking learners who have come to school for the first time and at the same time are confronted with English. What in actual fact happens in such classes is that the teachers make use of code switching (using an alternate language), otherwise none of the learners will understand a word of what the teacher is saying.

It is against this background that I explained a proposed gradual transitional bilingual language programme to the respondents. This was done after the first part of the questionnaire and discussions were completed

In the first instance, this programme involves that, during Grades 1–3, the medium of instruction should be the mother tongue or the language of the wider community. English will be taught as a subject.

A second component of the proposal is that the first language and Religious Education will throughout the lower and upper primary phases be taught by using the mother tongue as medium of instruction.

From Grade 1, the idea is that Physical Education and Health Awareness will be taught partly in English by starting with 20% English as medium of instruction and 80% mother tongue as medium of instruction. This time allocation will gradually increase up to Grade 6, where it will reach an allocation of 80% of the time to English and 20% of the time to the mother tongue as medium of instruction.

In Grades 2–7, it is proposed that English will be used as medium of instruction for Arts on the same basis as for Physical Education and Health Awareness, i.e. of gradually increasing the time allocation up to a ratio of 80%–20% (English and mother tongue, respectively).

During the first three years of school, Grades 1–3, a vocabulary list (mother tongue and English) for each subject will gradually be introduced to learners in all subjects. In Namibia, theme teaching forms the foundation of subject teaching, which may facilitate this effort.

Grade 4 is the most important year for the gradual transition to English as medium of instruction. The Grade 4 teachers will therefore need extra training in order to become experts, in their respective schools, with regard to bilingual teaching. Their knowledge of those methods associated with bilingual teaching are a prerequisite for the model to succeed. By June of the Grade 4 year, Mathematics and Natural Science and Health Education will be taught using English 50% of the time and mother tongue 50% of the time as medium of instruction. Most other subjects will be taught by using English 40% of the time as medium of instruction, and the mother tongue 60% of the time.

In Grade 5, Mathematics and Natural Science and Health Education will be taught through the medium of English for 70% of the time. The optional subject that was chosen (Craft & Technology, or Home Ecology, or Elementary Agriculture) and History will be taught through dual medium instruction by starting to use English 50% of the time and mother tongue/language of the wider community 50% of the time. The ratio of 40:60 will be used for English/mother tongue as medium of instruction for Basic Information Science and Social Studies.

In Grade 6, English will be used as medium of instruction for History, Civics, and the optional subject for 60% of the time, and mother tongue 40% of the time. The time allocation for Basic

Information Science and Social Studies will increase to 50% for each language. Mathematics and Natural Science and Health Education will be taught in this grade by using English 80% of the time and the other 20% will be used only to explain difficult concepts.

In Grade 7, the use of English as medium of instruction for Basic Information Science will increase to 70% of the time, and mother tongue will be used only 30% of the time. All other subjects, except the first languages and Religious Education, will be taught by using English 80% of the time and mother tongue 20% of the time.

In Grades 8 – 10, the medium of instruction will be English with the provision that 20% of the time may be used to explain concepts in the language of the wider community.

The sole medium of instruction in Grades 11 and 12 will be English.

6.4 Perception of a proposed gradual transition bilingual language programme

Almost 87% of the respondents were in favour of a proposed programme, perhaps because it does not involve a drastic change from the current programme. They feel rather that it is an improvement on the foundation already laid by the current programme. One respondent commented that the new proposal would help with a growing process that is of necessity long, and that learners will be able to adapt to the new language over a reasonable period of time, as the language will not overwhelm learners.

It is clear that most of the respondents are in favour of the proposed gradual transition bilingual language programme. The fact that they actually proposed this before the programme was explained significantly strengthen the notion that such a programme will have the support of teachers, provided it is implemented correctly. The involvement of all stakeholders when a change to current language policy is planned, is imperative in order let everyone feel responsible to make a new policy work.

All respondents are in agreement that the change from mother tongue to English as a medium of instruction should be a natural process.

The one problematic aspect remains the English language proficiency of teachers. Because the teachers do not have the required level of English language proficiency, it is difficult for them to explain concepts in English. They therefore revert to the mother tongue, ostensibly to make sure that all learners understand the work, but more probably because they are uncomfortable with their own English. The respondents feel that the teachers' level of proficiency in English has to be good to be able to transfer knowledge and skills to learners in English.

The gradual implementation of English over a seven year period appealed to respondents, since they feel that it would help learners to move gradually from the mother tongue to English, while there will be enough time to make sure that the basics of important concepts are laid correctly. They feel that this programme will not force learners into the unknown suddenly, for they will have time to master their mother tongue, which is important before a new language is learnt.

7. Implications

In Namibia, we are part of Africa. The Asmara Declaration (Ellis 2001) should therefore be viewed very seriously. Especially, if we heed the fifth clause of the Declaration, which states that *“All African children have the inalienable right to attend school and learn their mother tongues. Every effort should be made to develop African languages at all levels of education.”* We need to go back to our language policy and revise it in the light of this Declaration. This could possibly be the critical step that would help our learners to become academically more successful and also, eventually, to acquire a higher level of English language proficiency.

Recommendations regarding a modification of the language policy will be made in response to the following important questions:

7.1 What is needed?

Participants' responses during the study indicate that they are definitely in favour of a bilingual approach to the language policy. Teachers are actually already using a form of dual medium instruction

in class even after the stage that English was supposedly meant, according to current policy, to be the sole medium of instruction. This means that bilingual education, though not perhaps known by these terms, is not unfamiliar to Namibians.

So, what do we need to do to make changes to the current language policy? Namibians are ready for a change in the language policy, but it will have to happen as a combination of government policy and social demand. All stakeholders will have to be involved in the decision-making in order for it to succeed.

The Namibian language policy as published (MEC 1993) is a combination of an additive and subtractive model of language in education policy. During the initial implementation, the policy followed a gradual transition or late-exit immersion type of programme. Currently, it is a subtractive or early-exit language programme. The emphasis on English, when many schools opt for English as medium of instruction in Grade 1 already, may be repeating one of the most negative forms of submersion programmes.

7.2 What is possible?

Thorough research must be undertaken to compile a course that would suit the Namibian situation best. This is the most critical issue for any model, including the one embodied in the current policy.

A gradual transition bilingual programme will probably not succeed if (a) teachers do not understand the policy; (b) the political will to implement the policy does not exist; (c) the training of teachers and the English language proficiency of teachers do not improve; and (d) a national awareness campaign is not successful in informing all concerned of the advantages of the policy.

Changing a policy does not happen overnight. If the future success of learners is at stake, however, it becomes very important. We have to make a decision of how strongly we feel about our own national languages, the future of the Namibian youth, and the future of our country. I conclude with a message from the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, on International Mother Language Day (Annan 2001):

Along with nation and community, language is an essential component of identity and a means by which we find our place in the world. The very essence of belonging in an increasingly rootless world is to hear a language of one's own, to understand and be understood with ease. While differing languages have, in the past, separated peoples and groups, it is my hope that all peoples can unite in celebrating the full diversity of languages.

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