

# Education Vision

UGANDA'S LEADING EDUCATION PULL-OUT



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Some have welcomed the policy but critics say it may worsen the rural-urban divide in performance

By Carol Natukunda

## Does the mother tongue improve class performance?



READING: Children in urban schools speak and read English

**S**TARTING next year, mother tongue will become the medium of instruction from Primary One (P1) to P3 as government implements the thematic curriculum.

The move is based on several researches that have proved mother tongue improves performance. However, critics say this is likely to worsen the rural-urban divide in performance as urban areas will be allowed to use English because of their cosmopolitan nature. Under the policy, the most commonly used local language will be taught as a subject, but evaluation of learning will be in the language of instruction. This means urban schools will be examined in English while their rural counterparts will be examined in the local languages up to P3.

"That will give town schools an advantage over village schools because UNEB examinations are set and answered in English," said a teacher. "There is no way a child who has been instructed in English for only four years can favourably compete with the one who has been taught in English from nursery school," added the teacher.

Research findings, however, show that mother tongue instruction in lower classes contributes to improved learning, builds a child's confidence and does not affect development of the second language. In his 2003 study *Children's Mother Tongue in Education*, Jim Cimmis, a language specialist at the University of Toronto, says:

"The level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development. Children perform better in school when the school effectively teaches their mother tongue and where appropriate, develops literacy in that language."

He says, when children are encouraged to reject their mother tongue, or its development, their personal and conceptual foundation for learning is undermined and stagnated.

A research unit at George Mason University in the US has monitored results at 23 primary schools in 15 states since 1965. Four out of six different curricula involved were partly conducted in the mother tongue. The survey showed that after 11 years of schooling, there was a direct link between academic results and the time spent learning in the mother tongue. Those who did best in high school had bilingual education in primary school.

Dr Rod Hicks, a language consultant at the Ministry of Education and Sports, also says children learn to read more easily in a language they know. "Once children can read their own language, they will be able to transfer these skills in English," he says.

Connie Kateeba, the director of the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) says the use of mother tongue, being piloted in 11 districts, has led to

increased enrolment. The districts include Kampala, Iganga, Kumi, Moroto, Rukungiri, Kasese, Rakai, Gulu, Arua, Nakasongola and Kabarole.

"More children joined P1 as a result of the use of mother tongue. There is such a happy learning atmosphere in the class — lots of jokes and discussions," Kateeba told a recent stakeholders' workshop in Kampala.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and

Cultural Organisation in a 2003 report say children instructed in mother tongue tend to be emotionally confident and do well in secondary school.

"Children who learn in another language may think if they want success intellectually, it won't be by using their mother tongue or that their mother tongue is useless," it adds.

Many middle-aged parents are also in support of the issue. "Today's children are in their own world, without knowledge of their own languages. So this will help them know their mother tongue," says Gerald Bukwirwa a father of two.

Cissy Kiwanuka, a parent and local author, says it could revive the practice of story telling among the young generation.

"There is a lot to learn from the vernacular tales and proverbs," she says.

### The language policy

Education minister Namirembe Bitamazire says a 2004 study recommended curriculum review, following concerns of failure by many children to acquire sufficient literacy and numeracy skills in both local languages and English.

Prior to implementing the policy, NCDC is supposed to train all lower primary teachers and district officials on how to teach using the new curriculum.

Districts are supposed to revive language boards. Senior teachers are supposed to be posted to handle lower classes. Where the area language is not the child's first language, a teacher is supposed to delay the introduction of reading and writing until until the teacher is convinced the child has mastered the language.

Sam Onek, the commissioner for pre-primary and primary school, says instructional materials in mother tongues will be pro-

cured the same way it is done for other subjects.

### Challenges of the policy

It requires a huge financial investment to procure vernacular textbooks. Uganda officially has 59 languages although it is recommended that only the five major languages — Luganda, Lwo, Runyakitara, Ateso/Ng'akaramojong and Lugbara be taught.

"With Government still struggling to supply enough textbooks in the key subjects, one wonders why we should go into this project now," says a ministry official.

In the past, the policy succeeded because there were sub-grade teachers trained in Vernacular Teacher Training Colleges, which were scrapped and replaced with Teacher Training Colleges.

In Botswana, the policy was criticised for restricting the mobility of teachers only to areas where they can speak the mother tongue. The same might apply to Uganda.

Worse still, the teachers seem not to be ready. "It is hard especially when we have children of different backgrounds. English is the easiest choice," says Francis Senabulya the head-teacher of Kitante Primary School.

Ibrahim Haswa, the deputy headteacher of St. Paul Primary School, Banda, concurs with Senabulya. "Children need to fit in the competitive world. English will suffer," Haswa argues.

Louis Buwembo, a retired teacher in Kyambogo, curses Uganda's education system. "If we are already complaining that UPE has produced half-baked children, would this make it any better? I think we are throwing education to the dogs," he says.

Worse still, three out of five teachers interviewed confessed to *Education Vision* that they do not also know how to speak or write exclusively in their mother tongue.

Senabulya feels the Ministry of Education needs to train teachers right from colleges, in their respective mother tongues.

Some of today's children have grown up with no idea of their mother tongue, except English like in the case of Elizabeth, a pupil of City Parents School.

"My mother comes from Rwanda and my father is a Muganda. We speak English at home. I have no mother tongue," she says.

Moses Otyek, the acting director of Education Standards Agency, says the policy will increase on the teacher's workload.