

Why schools should teach young learners in home language

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In countries where English is not the first language, many parents and communities believe their children will get a head-start in education by going 'straight for English' and bypassing the home language. However, as Professor Kioko points out, the evidence suggests otherwise.

Many governments, like Burundi recently, are now making English an official national language. Their motivation behind this is to grow their economies and improve the career prospects of their younger generations. Alongside this move, we are seeing a trend, particularly across Sub-Saharan Africa, to introduce English as a medium of instruction in basic education.

However, research findings consistently show that learners benefit from using their home language in education in early grade years (ahead of a late primary transition stage). Yet, many developing countries continue to use other languages for teaching in their schools.

In Kenya, the language of instruction is English, and some learners in urban and some cosmopolitan settings speak and understand some English by the time they join school. But

learners in the rural areas enter school with only their home language. For these learners, using the mother tongue in early education leads to a better understanding of the curriculum content and to a more positive attitude towards school. There are a number of reasons for this.



First, learning does not begin in school. Learning starts at home in the learners' home language. Although the start of school is a continuation of this learning, it also presents significant changes in the mode of education. The school system structures and controls the content and delivery of a pre-determined curriculum where previously the child was learning from experience (an experiential learning Opens in a new tab or window. mode).

On starting school, children find themselves in a new physical environment. The classroom is

new, most of the classmates are strangers, the centre of authority (the teacher) is a stranger too. The structured way of learning is also new. If, in addition to these things, there is an abrupt change in the language of interaction, then the situation can get quite complicated. Indeed, it can negatively affect a child's progress. However, by using the learners' home language, schools can help children navigate the new environment and bridge their learning at school with the experience they bring from home.



Second, by using the learners' home language, learners are more likely to engage in the learning process. The interactive learner-centred approach – recommended by all educationalists – thrives in an environment where learners are sufficiently proficient in the language of instruction. It allows learners to make suggestions, ask questions, answer questions and create and communicate new knowledge with enthusiasm. It gives learners

confidence and helps to affirm their cultural identity. This in turn has a positive impact on the way learners see the relevance of school to their lives.

But when learners start school in a language that is still new to them, it leads to a teacher-centred approach and reinforces passiveness and silence in classrooms. This in turn suppresses young learners' potential and liberty to express themselves freely. It dulls the enthusiasm of young minds, inhibits

their creativity, and makes the learning experience unpleasant. All of which is bound to have a negative effect on learning outcomes.

A crucial learning aim in the early years of education is the development of basic literacy skills: reading, writing and arithmetic. Essentially, the skills

of reading and writing come down to the ability to associate the sounds of a language with the letters or symbols used in the written form. These skills build on the foundational and interactional skills of speaking and listening. When learners speak or understand the language used to instruct them, they develop reading and writing skills faster and in a more meaningful way. Introducing reading and writing to learners in a language they speak

and understand leads to great excitement when they discover that they can make sense of written texts and can write the names of people and things in their environment. Research in Early Grade Reading (EGRA) has shown that pupils who develop reading skills early have a head-start in education.

It has also been shown that skills and concepts taught in the learners' home language do not have to be re-taught when they transfer to a second language. A learner who knows how to read and write in one language will develop reading and writing skills in a new language faster. The learner already knows that letters represent sounds, the only new learning he or she needs is how the new language 'sounds' its letters. In the same way, learners automatically transfer knowledge acquired in one language to another language as soon as they have learned sufficient vocabulary in the new language. For example, if you teach learners in their mother tongue, that seeds need soil, moisture and warmth to germinate. You do not have to re-teach this in English. When they have developed adequate vocabulary in English, they will translate the information. Thus, knowledge and skills are transferable from one language to another. Starting school in the learners' mother tongue does not delay education but leads to faster acquisition of the skills and attitudes needed for success in formal education.

Use of the learners' home language at the start of school also lessens the burden on teachers, especially where the teacher speaks the local language well (which is the case in the majority of the rural schools in multilingual settings). Research has shown that in learning situations where both the teacher and the learner are non-native users of the language of instruction, the teacher struggles as much as the learners, particularly at the start of education. But when teaching starts in the teachers' and learners' home language, the experience is more natural and less stressful for all. As a result, the teacher can be more creative and innovative in designing teaching/learning materials and approaches, leading to improved learning outcomes.

In summary, the use of learners' home language in the classroom promotes a smooth transition between home and school. It means learners get more involved in the learning process and speeds up the development of basic literacy skills. It also enables more flexibility, innovation and creativity in teacher preparation. Using learners' home language is also more likely to get the support of the general community in the teaching/learning process and creates an emotional stability which translates to cognitive stability. In short, it leads to a better educational outcome.

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