The nexus between education, learning, and language

By

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“And I’ll take you home
Not just for the weekend
We’ll chase the days alive
Welcome in the night
I want another sign

And I’ll keep you warm
Not just for this moment
We’ll walk a million miles
Through the years of our lives
Never alone, Cos I’ll take you home”

(Leith, 2007)

Abstract

Language plays a central role in cognition and learning, and language-in-education policy determines who has access to education. Fifty years after the proclamation of independence in Africa, education is still sought through colonial languages (English, French or Portuguese), and these languages remain the key to acquiring, maintaining and enhancing a higher socio-economic and political standing. Whilst multilingualism is the most prominent feature of speech communities in Africa, the education of the African child is still locked into a monolingual policy of language substitution, a policy that imposes a language of instruction that the majority of learners do not know and that
wrongly assumes that all learners possess the same backgrounds and experiences.

This paper argues that the time has come for a much needed paradigm shift, in order to put in place new, practical solutions to the wasteful and long-held practice of insisting on a language-in-education policy that has failed to deliver the desired results. Language-in-education policy needs to be better targeted, in order to create a truly learning society, a society in which education is much more responsive to the immediate realities of the learners, as well as to those of a globalising and changing world. Along these lines, the paper discusses emerging opportunities for innovation in education and learning that can better integrate local languages as media of instruction.

1. Introduction

Language is more than a means of communication, because it is through language that we, as human beings, construct, learn and understand concepts and practices. Our identities take shape and are shaped by the language(s) we speak and encounter. The knowledge and science we acquire are conditioned by language(s). Language is therefore strategically important in building inclusive knowledge societies and in making progress in attaining sustainable endogenous development.

Hence, language, education and learning in Africa are far more than a desire or a means of preserving cultural and linguistic diversity. They are not an artefact of the school curriculum; but fundamental pedagogic and strategic approaches to imparting knowledge and know-how, in order to lift the continent out of its current socio-political doldrums and economic misery. Language, education and
learning go to the heart of how we make education and technology transfer inclusive, how we help both learners and teachers, and people in general, interact more naturally and negotiate meanings in ways that improve the effectiveness of the learning process (Baker, 2001: 238), how we make the educational experience of young and old of greater relevance to their daily life, and how we facilitate greater participation of the people in their community at local and national levels.

In Africa, one should not be learning a language or learn through a language to ask for stamps at a post-office, when millions of people are in urgent need of health care and relief from hunger. Learning a language or learning through a language should enable the majority of the people to contribute to, and benefit from, economic growth. It should help them understand the practical use of fertiliser and increase the production of maize or rice, improve reproductive health, avoid the curse of preventable and deadly diseases, at the same time that it is helping their children pass geometry, mathematics or science tests (der Walt, 2006: 170). That is why conceptual development in a mother tongue is bound to be more effective than the compulsory and sudden immersion in a European language.

In a position paper entitled *Education in a Multilingual World*, UNESCO (2003) defines Education for All as “a quality education for all … including consideration of the many varied cultural and linguistic contexts that exist in contemporary societies.” Although cognitive development in children can occur through languages other than the mother tongue, it notes that “research has shown that learners learn best in their mother tongue as a prelude to and
complement of bilingual education approaches.” (See Preface of *Education in a Multilingual World*, UNESCO, 2003). A raft of African and international instruments, support the use of mother tongue education², including, for Africa, the OAU Language Plan for Action (1986), which lays emphasis on the use of African languages as media of instruction and as working languages at all levels of government, the Draft Charter for the Promotion of African Languages (1996), the Harare Declaration (1997), and the Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures (2000). The basic principles underlying these documents are the acceptance of multilingualism as a fact of life in Africa, and the need to empower the languages that the African people know best at all levels, as working languages, media of instruction and languages of the mass media. Furthermore, many scholars have argued that the exclusive use of a European language as medium of instruction in sub-Saharan Africa is, at least in part, responsible for the illiteracy, low school enrolments, high school repeat and drop-out rates, and social inequity on the continent (Bokamba, 1991; Bokamba, 1984; Hutchinson, 1983). There is no denying that the existing educational system is beset by a woeful lack of materials in quantity and quality, insufficient educational infrastructure, and high levels of illiteracy.

Yet, fifty years on, conferences on the use of African languages in education and learning still debate *whether* to use African languages as media of instruction, rather than *how* to use them (Bamgbose, 2004: 18) and various arguments and myths against the use of mother tongues in education are rehearsed by those who would have us believe that good education in Africa can only be imparted through a European language (Chaudenson, 1987 & 1989; Dumont, 1990). Can education through language substitution offer the best chance for all learners to
gain the basic life-long functional literacy skills they need to bridge the knowledge gap and achieve a sustainable level of endogenous development? Does it make economic sense to hang on to the policies of the last fifty years?

2. The current state of affairs in education and learning in sub-Saharan Africa

Six years into the adoption of the World Declaration on Education for All in Jomtien (Thailand), the final communiqué of the Mid-Decade Meeting of the International Consultative Forum on Education for All in Amman, Jordan, was claiming significant progress in basic education, an increase in primary school enrolment and a decline in the numbers of children out-of-school, a growing emphasis on the quality of education and a spirit of innovation for important educational advances in the years ahead⁴. Four years later, in Dakar (Senegal), the international community (160 governments) committed to six goals aimed at ensuring quality Education for All by 2015⁵. Again, whilst pointing to some measure of success⁶, it is noted that school enrolment is not enough, and much still remains to be done in the areas of early childhood education, gender parity and literacy⁶. The Education For All Development Index (EDI), calculated for 129 countries, shows that 25 of these countries - two-thirds of which are in sub-Saharan Africa - are far from achieving Education For All. In 17 of these countries, less than 63 percent of pupils reached the last grade of primary school. Even though more children are going to school than ever before, many more are dropping out before grade 5, or graduate without mastering basic cognitive skills. According to the EDI, 22 countries in sub-Saharan Africa are far behind meeting these goals (UNESCO 2007)⁷. UNESCO (2000) also estimates that 50 percent of school-aged children are not attending school in West and Central
Africa, and one out of three children is not attending school in Eastern and Southern Africa. The overall rate of attrition is 25 percent, and the dropout rate is also 25 percent of the school age population. The performances of all sub-Saharan educational systems are among the lowest in the world, with only 60 pupils out of 100 able to complete primary school, and only 30 competent in the basic learning skills. In Burkina Faso for example, children average 2.9 years of schooling (3.5 years for boys and 2.3 years for girls). In Kenya, where school enrolment is free since 2003, 22 percent of school age children, or 1.7 million children are still not going to school. In Malawi, where the same policy of free enrolment has been implemented since 1994, school enrolments are still low; and of those children who attend school, only 10 percent can understand the school curriculum. Similarly, in Burundi, where school fees were abolished in 2005, Education For All is a real struggle. According to the second Southern [and Eastern] Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ II, see also Mothibeli, 2005), by grade 6, more than 55 percent of students in 14 Southern and Eastern African countries have not attained the minimal level of literacy required to remain in the school system. Overall, sub-Saharan Africa will be burdened with some 57 million children out of school. Adult literacy is also neglected and 72 out of 101 countries, for which projections were made, will not succeed in halving adult illiteracy rates by 2015 (EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008). In other words, sub-Saharan Africa is not on track to achieve the six Education for All goals.

These education results make no mention of the language of learning and/or literacy in sub-Saharan Africa, and how knowledge information is imparted and/or accessed. Indeed, data in literacy, or lack thereof, in developing
countries do not always take account of the sorts of linguistic adjustment learners need to make in pursuit of education; they simply assume that all learners share the same backgrounds and experiences. But competence in the language of education is a significant factor in learning and in capacity-building. Everyone is now agreed that language-in-education policies must be grounded in a concern for inclusion of all. If this is the case, then we must keep on asking whether education in European language(s) is the only way, or the best way, to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1) in sub-Saharan Africa, and whether it is the only way, or the best way, to achieve universal primary education (MDG 2), or prevent against HIV/AIDS, malaria and other preventable diseases (MDG 6).

The dysfunction of the educational systems and the underachievement of school-aged children in Africa are widely documented, and they all suggest that educational achievement is in great part a function of the language-in-education policies and practices. According to Obanya (1980: 88) “It has always been felt by African educationists that the African child’s major learning problem is linguistic. Instruction is given in a language that is not normally used in his [sic] immediate environment, a language, which neither the learner nor the teacher understands and uses well enough”. The use of the European language limits both teachers and students in what they can say, as opposed to what they would like to say, thereby imposing an unnecessary obstacle between the students and the knowledge that they are supposed to acquire (Alidou and Brock-Utne, 2006).

This lack of flexibility in the language of instruction forces teachers to use inappropriate and ineffective pedagogical practices, such as chorus teaching, repetition, rote-learning, code-switching and safe talk, which undermine the teachers’ effort to teach and the pupils’ effort to learn. Furthermore, teachers
tend to do most of the talking, while the pupils remain silent or passive, during most of the classroom interactions. Probyn (2001 & 2005) suggests that pupils may feel alienated from the subject content, when it is not expressed in their mother tongue. In a study of the medium of instruction in different African countries, Rubagumya (1994: 1) also notes that the language of instruction “acts to varying degrees as a barrier to effective learning”. Eisemon et al. (1989) report that, in the primary schools they surveyed in Kenya, science instruction was characterised by imprecise and incoherent discourse, due to the teachers’ lack of mastery of the science content and competence in the English language, and many Standard 6 pupils found it difficult to follow instructions in English (Muthwii, 2002). Some teachers acknowledge the fact that when the medium of instruction is a European language, it constitutes a major stumbling block for pupils’ understanding and academic success (NCCRD, 2000, and Probyn, 2001). In Burkina Faso, where most of the budget for primary schools is spent on the teaching of French (56 percent of the entire curriculum), Alain Sissao writes: “Only 25 of 100 pupils understand what they read in French in Burkina Faso primary schools; twenty are able to write a short essay describing a familiar situation, and not one has functional reading skills (i.e. reading a table of contents, reading instructions, etc.)”8 [Own translation]. Sissao goes on to suggest that “French, which is only spoken in the classroom, in the presence of the teacher, should be taught as a foreign language”. In Nigeria, a performance survey of high school students showed that only 9.7 percent did well enough in English in the university entrance examination, whilst 64.3 percent failed (Bamgbose, 2004: 22). In the late 1990s, the Applied Linguistics Institute of the University of Cocody launched a pedagogical experiment in Côte d’Ivoire
known as “Le Projet-Nord”. The Projet-Nord was an experiment in mother-tongue instruction; namely in Dyula, in the Odienné region, and Sénoufo, in the regions of Korhogo and Katiola. UNESCO deemed the experiment to be a resounding success, as it was shown that the pupils in the fourth year of this project had achieved a level of understanding in mathematics at least equal to that of Year 11 students in the traditional school system, where the only language of instruction is French. Nevertheless, for some unknown reason, the project was suddenly abandoned. In 2001/2002, the then Minister of Education decided to revive the experiment and launched the Projet Ecole Intégrée throughout the country, in a number of local languages, as languages of instruction; namely: Abidji, Adjoukrou, Agni, Attié, Baoulé, Bété, Dyula, Mawu, Sénoufo and Wè. The aims of the project are threefold: (1) teaching and learning in the mother tongue of the pupils, (2) teaching literacy to the parents of the pupils in their mother tongue, with a view involving the parents into the learning activities of their children, and (3) introducing the pupils to agro-pastoral activities, together with children who have dropped out of the traditional school system. The children organise a school cooperative under the supervision of a teacher, who acts as a technical adviser. They then determine which activities to undertake, they then sell the fruits of their labour and use the income to improve their school facilities. Beyond the pedagogical exercise, the project aims to put in place an educational system that engages both the pupils and their parents on a process of lifelong learning. This contrasts with a traditional and elitist educational system, where French is the sole language of instruction, and which leaves the illiterate parents behind, whilst creating challenges, linguistic and otherwise, for the learner (Ayewa, 2007).
When the language of instruction is familiar to students, communication does not just improve with teachers (Bergmann et al., 2002: 66) and makes it easier for teachers and learners to negotiate meaning in an effective way (Baker, 2001: 238), it also improves with parents, and between teachers and parents, hence facilitating greater participation from the parents and the school community (World Bank 2005), and leads to better teaching and learning all around. Instruction in the mother tongue leads to inclusion of more local content in the curriculum, and makes the educational experience much more relevant to the learner. Parents lose their fear of the school, when they are able to discuss the learning process their child has embarked on with both the child and her teacher. The evidence showing that active learning takes place in programs where instruction is done in languages that are known to the teachers and students, and that students who learn in their own language do better in school, is overwhelming (e.g. Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Malawi, Niger, Tanzania and Zambia) (Alidou, 1997; Alidou & Mallam, 2003; Bamgbose, 2005b; Brock-Utne, 2000; Brock-Utne, Desai & Qorro, 2004; Chekaraou, 2004; Heugh, 2000; Ilboudo, 2003; Mwinsheikhe, 2002; Ouédraogo, 2002; Prophet and Dow, 1994), and many are those who now advocate an increased use of mother tongues as media of instruction, to promote cognitive development and improved second language learning (Heugh, 1995). Beyond examples of successful literacy experiments in the mother tongue (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, and Tanzania), all of which show that initial literacy in the mother tongue can enhance learning skills, including the learning of European languages at a later stage, mother-tongue instruction in primary and secondary schools has
also been shown to be a viable alternative to instruction in a European language, because it can help build on what the learners and teachers already know. Despite all this evidence, “African languages, as media of instruction, are generally limited to lower primary levels of schooling and an extension to upper primary classes is rare” Bamgbose (2004: 25). Logistical difficulties in providing education in the mother tongue are often raised to argue against this solution. Hornberger (2002: 30) writes that, to “transform a standardising education into a diversifying one” presents an ideological paradox; a paradox clearly reflected in the educational systems of many African countries. Whilst not denying these difficulties, extending the reach of education in developing countries calls for a much bolder focus on the nexus between education, learning and language; and this focus requires looking to innovative ways of resolving both the logistical difficulties and the cost-benefit issues attached to education in the mother tongue. The argument here is about the necessity of language and culture as the necessary vehicles of basic and functional literacy, life-long knowledge and know-how and therefore of endogenous development.

Many, it seems, have yet to grasp the incalculable human costs of the education crisis in Africa, and its related consequences. The reality is there for those who want to see it, and no amount of theorising can gloss over it. Educational deprivation threatens to consign the continent to an increasingly marginal future, and the debate would be greatly enhanced if everyone partaking in it took the time to familiarize themselves with, and understand the dysfunctional nature of the education system in Africa. Education is empowerment; it is the key to a sustainable development founded on social justice. The formulation of an appropriate language-in-education policy is therefore critical to successful
education and the survival and development of a polity. Needless to say, an ill-conceived language policy can have disastrous results as is today evidenced in most of sub-Saharan Africa. The overall economic impact of the education crisis is huge and, as Djité (2008a) writes, one should not lose sight of the synergy between education, literacy, learning and the other pillars of development that are: health, education the economy and governance. In the next section of this paper, we take a brief look at how the lack of education, literacy and learning can affect the health of the people.

3. The nexus between language, education and health

Literacy (and numeracy) skills are at the heart of education and educational opportunities; lack of these functional skills make speech communities unable to face development challenges and much more vulnerable to poverty, preventable diseases, exclusion and exploitation. Persisting high levels of child and adult illiteracy undermine much more than the chances of achieving education for all by 2015, they also undermine health.

For example, although the United Nations Development Program Human Development Report 2007/2008 puts the literacy rate in the Unites States to 99 percent, a five-year, US$14 million study of U.S. adult literacy in twelve states across the country, commissioned by the U.S. government showed that 21 to 23 percent of adult Americans are functionally illiterate and, as a consequence, are not “able to locate information in text”, can not “make low-level inferences using printed materials”, and can not read well enough to hold a good job. This study
estimates that up to 20 percent of American adults lack basic reading and writing skills - ranging from signing one’s name to identifying basic information from a simple form - and an additional 2 percent are marginally literate (meaning they can not fill out an application or interpret instructions for an appliance) (Kirsch I. et al., 1993). A follow-up study showed that there was no statistically significant improvement in these figures (Kutner, Greenberg, and Baer, 2005)\(^\text{10}\).

Even in developed countries, limited literacy is viewed as an inhibiting factor in, amongst other things, accessing health information, as individuals struggle or are unable to read educational materials, directives, forms, and informed-consent documents commonly used in the health field. In other words, health literacy skills are not what they should be. Health literacy is defined as the capacity of individuals to obtain, process, and understand the basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions; that is to say, the ability to use printed and written information associated with a broad range of health-related tasks to accomplish one’s goals at home, in the workplace, and in the community (Seldon et al., 2000; Kurtner et al., 2006). It includes tasks such as a patient’s ability to read and understand instructions on prescription drug bottles, appointment slips, medical education brochures, doctor’s directions and consent forms. Another aspect of health literacy is oral communication; that is to say, the ability to orally comprehend what a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist says about what the health problem is, what to do about the problem, and why it is important to take immediate action.
According to a study by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (25 June 2008), the health of many Australians is threatened by their inability to read and write. The study indicates that people’s health-related decisions are strongly associated with their level of education and literacy skills. Proliteracy America (2003) argues that low literacy, poor health and early death are inexorably linked. In other words, those who lack basic literacy skills are much more likely than others to suffer from heart disease, diabetes, and prostate cancer. Illiterate or low-literate women are affected in terms of birth control, pregnancy, giving birth and raising children (Gazmararian, Parker & Baker, 1999). Rudd, Moeykens and Colton (2000) have found that “death rates for chronic diseases, communicable diseases and injuries are all conversely related to education for men and women”. This is mainly due to low literacy adults not being able to read or understand medication labels or may read them incorrectly. As a result, they often lack information about where to go for help and when to seek help (Williams et al., 1995), make less informed decisions than others about their treatment options, and can not participate effectively in two way communication with health care providers (Pfizer, 2002).

Literacy levels also highly correlate with the adults’ ability to look after the welfare of their own children (Grosse & Auffrey, 1989; Weiss, Hart, McGee & D’Estelle, 1992). There is a direct link between the parents’ education level and their children’s performance in school (Hayes, 2002), and the children of low-literate parents tend to get poor health care and nutrition at home, and do poorly at school (Proliteracy America, 2003: 19-22). Low literacy impacts on parents’ understanding of medical information and ability to follow therapy prescribed
for their children (Moon et al., 1998) and, crucially, maternal illiteracy is strongly associated with specific health outcomes, such as malnutrition, low immunization rates, and high infant mortality (Arya & Devi, 1991; Foege & Henderson, 1986).

If the foregoing is the current state of affairs in developed countries, where the majority are believed to interact in their own mother tongue, then one can only imagine the negative impact of the lack, not only of health literacy, but of literacy in general, in sub-Saharan Africa. This means that most people, adults, women and children, who have the basic human right to decent health care, when they are lucky enough to find a doctor, a nurse or a pharmacist, who are already in very short supply, can not understand many of the basic health instructions they receive, not only because they are illiterate, but because they are illiterate in a foreign language. Well-meaning patients in sub-Saharan Africa are simply not able to take medications as directed, not only because they do not understand the directions, dosage, or interactions with other prescriptions, but because they do not even understand the language(s) these are written in. The youth of sub-Saharan Africa are not able to read the warning signs on cigarette packs or other harmful products, not only because they can not read, but because they can not read the European language in which these warning signs are written. Even verbal information is often transmitted in a language that they do not understand, as most doctors and nurses use the official European language in their interactions with the patient population. Hence, they are unable to follow medical instructions correctly. This is only one of the many challenges the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in this part of the world face in trying to improve their conditions of life. The fight for the MDGs begins with, among other things,
good health. But the fight for good health and decent health care services begins with literacy and education; and literacy and education begin not only with language, but most importantly with the ability of the target population to understand and take an active part in the process of development. Literacy is important as a tool of personal empowerment and a means of social and human development; but it is a fallacy of grand proportion to think that the majority of the population in sub-Saharan Africa will attain the sorts of literacy levels being recorded in developed countries in languages that are foreign to their everyday interactions.

When they are made aware of the extent and significance of the tragedy evolving in sub-Saharan Africa over the last fifty years, in part because of a misguided language-in-education policy based on a mythical superiority of European languages and the expediency of pragmatism\textsuperscript{11}, many simply despair. Others ask if there is anything that can be done to salvage the situation. The following section of this paper suggests that there are avenues and opportunities to rectify and improve the language-in-education policies that are currently prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa.

4. Looking into the future

In *The Sociolinguistics of Development in Africa*, Djité (2008a) has discussed the contribution recent developments in Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) can make to the management of multilingualism and how local languages can be used to make education a lever of development. In a follow-up paper (Djité 2008b), he argues that, just as Africans received Christianity and adopted it as their own, creating their own forms
(enculturation), they can adapt the new ICTs and use them for their own purposes, especially in the areas of education, literacy and learning. The work of some ICT Experts promises to provide a pathway for accessing new knowledge articulated in the language(s) of the African child. These technologies, offering the technical tools to address many of the constraints that held back African languages, can help bridge the digital divide.

One of these initiatives is the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) project, which already provides inexpensive laptop computers, also known as the green or XO machines, to some 600,000 children in Afghanistan, Argentina, Brazil, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Haiti, Libya, Mexico, Mongolia, Nigeria, Peru, Rwanda and Uruguay, and the US and Canada, as a result of the Give One Get One charitable giving campaign that ran up until December 31, 2007. The technology behind the OLPC project has been hailed as an innovation that could revolutionise education for nearly two-billion children in the developing world, giving them access to knowledge and modern forms of education.

A number of similar initiatives have since been announced. In April 2007, Microsoft announced that it will make software available for US$3 to poor countries that offer PCs to pupils and students (AFP, 20 April 2007) and, in May 2007, India, which has already developed a US$47 PC, announced that it was working on building a US$10 computer that will be connected via Internet to a central server, with access to Word or Excel. In May 2008, OLPC unveiled plans for a second generation, book-like design of the XO called XO-2 or XO-XO. OLPC estimates that the XO-2, which will become available in 2010, will cost around US$75. This new computer, which will be slimmer and lighter than the original version, comes with dual-touch screens, one of which can be used as a
keyboard to enable standard typewriter style of computing. Because the XO-2 uses a virtual keyboard, it is customizable to any language or alphabet. At the very least, these developments demonstrate that adapting technology to the needs of developing countries is feasible.

Significantly, at its June 2008 meeting in Paris, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), in its biggest transformation in decades, voted to open up the Internet naming convention, in order to allow more options. In other words, instead of being limited to .com, .org, .au, .uk or .fr as the last letters of their Web addresses, companies, organizations or individuals can register a domain based on their own name or any other string of letters at the end of their URL, as long as they can show a “business plan and technical capacity”\textsuperscript{13} The process of introducing the new system is set to start in the third quarter of 2009.

Even more significant, the new domain names can be written in other languages (e.g.; Asian and Arabic scripts). This means a complete overhaul of the way in which people navigate the Internet, and hundreds of new domain names could therefore be created by the end of the year, rising to thousands in the future. Although it is unlikely that individuals will be able to take advantage of the new naming conventions to create more personalized Web sites - some experts predict that it may initially cost around US$50,000 to register a new domain name – ICANN expects a broad range of applicants, including indigenous communities interested in protecting aspects of their languages and cultures. Indeed, associations or companies such as (see mentioned above) may very well be able to use this new opportunity.
Together with software localisation and terminology work carried out in a number of African languages over the last few years (e.g.; the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa – PRAESA -, the Centre for Advanced Studies in African Society – CASAS – and the various projects of the African Academy of Languages – ACALAN14), these technological innovations now make it possible to provide versions of this technology in languages specific to the receiving countries. They make ownership of this technology possible in African languages and further shatter the myth of “languages of technology and science”, whilst bolstering the case for linguistic plurality in information technology. Hence, one no longer has to assume that the most effective languages for learning in the developing world are European languages. Eliminating the linguistic hegemony of the rich over the poor through education, literacy and learning is the first step to reducing poverty; and it is time that African linguists, educators, governments and private enterprise gear up to improve on these initiatives, by ensuring that all school children not only have access to a computer, but that they can do so in their mother tongue(s). The immediate practical language needs and constraints that have shaped the language-in-education policies in Africa in the early fifties and sixties now need to be balanced against the future needs and opportunities of the continent.

Conclusion

We can all remember the times when IMF and World Bank Experts were of the view that governments in developing countries were distorting market forces by giving access to grain banks and fertilisers to their farmers, an approach that led to the dumping of cheap products from developed countries. For five decades
now, we have been witnessing a push for developing countries to depend entirely on European languages in their educational systems and given up their own languages. Many who champion such a solution are emboldened by the lack of desire in developing countries to put in place policies that will ensure Education For All, long-term independence and prosperity. But how can people face-up to their governments and hold them to account, when they have no idea whatsoever of the sorts of decisions that are being made on their behalf, in part or mainly because of the language in which these decisions are debated?

Science is not neutral, and we must ask ourselves the relevance of a school curriculum that is divorced from the reality and aims of the learners. Critics of mother tongue education often rehearse the same articles of faith about multilingualism in Africa and economic rationalism, while ignoring the statistics about the failure of the exclusive use of a European language as the medium of instruction. But all the evidence thus far suggests that the policy of education in European languages is not sustainable in the African context (Djité, 2008a; Bamgbose, 2004) and that “Everything is nothing in education without language”. It is hard to deny that there is a strong positive correlation between language of instruction and achievement at school, and that the choice of the medium of instruction plays a crucial role in the learning process. Education, after all, is about deepening and enriching the school experience in terms of lifelong learning. Freire (1970) has already argued for the nexus between education and language, in what he called critical pedagogy. Language may not be everything in education for a host of different reasons, and the use of mother-tongue instruction in and by itself will not guarantee success, without real commitment to mother tongue education and widespread effective strategies.
for its dissemination (capacities that countries with struggling economies show few signs of developing).

However, it is interesting to note that, as we are meeting here, the European theme seminars at the 15th Congress of Applied Linguistics of the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée (AILA) at the University Duisburg-Essen (Germany) on “Multilingualism: Challenges and Opportunities” comprise a presentation about a €5 million research project (project DYLAN) on the management of language diversity in Europe, sponsored by the European Union, which seeks to identify the conditions under which Europe’s linguistic diversity can be an asset rather than a drawback. The goal of the project is to investigate how different modes of thought, argumentation and action, which are themselves linked to different languages, partake in the development and transmission of knowledge, and what role they play in the control of interactions, problem solving and decision making. Inspired by DYLAN, is another seminar entitled Multilingualism in EU Institutions, which asks whether multilingualism can be maintained in the EU institutions and focuses on the legitimacy and practicality of potential solutions to the problem. Also being discussed is Multilingualism and minority languages: Achievements and challenges in education, a theme which looks at European minority languages which are ‘unique’ languages in one state (e.g.; Irish, Welsh, Frisian) or spread over more than one state (e.g.; Basque, Catalan) and examines the challenges of teaching through a minority language in a changing world; and, finally, a symposium on Language education reforms at the margins of Europe: Policies, practices, challenges concerns itself with changing language-in-education policies for the provision of (multilingual) education in a selection of Central and Eastern European countries.
So, we are in good company; and the issues of education, literacy and learning are not just limited to the African continent. Clearly, it is wrong to assume that any people, no matter how poor, will be prepared to – or ought to be prepared to – pay a social and cultural price, in order to be able to read and write (Coulmas, 2001). It is condescending to believe that African nations have to make do with what they have, and can not afford the luxury of foresight. When one cares for human beings, one has to show compassion and help them help themselves, not just for here and now, but through all the years of their lives (Leith, 2007); we can start doing this for sub-Saharan Africa, by restoring education and learning in the languages that are readily available to the majority of the people.

References


Science and Technology and the Fifth Malawian National Languages Symposium, Mangochi, Malawi, 30 August-3 September. Zomba:

University of Malawi.


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### Notes

1 Theme song of the Australian Channel 10 TV Series “Saving Kids”, published by Universal Music Publishing Pty Ltd
See Article 2 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1 of the UNESCO Constitution, Article 5 of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the 1996 Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which came into force on 1 March 1998, Articles 2.1, 14.3(a), 14.3(f), 19.2, 19.3, 24.1, 26 and 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 17, 29, 30 and 40 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 3 and 4, paragraph 4, of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, Articles 1, 2(b) and 5.1(c) of the UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education, Articles 28(1), (2), (3) and 30 of the ILO Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, Articles 14, 15 and 17 of the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Articles 13 and 14 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Articles 21, 22 and 41 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 27 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 4 of the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, Article 28 of the 1989 ILO Convention 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, Article 5 of the 1985 Declaration on the Human Rights of Individuals who are not Nationals of the Country in which they live, Article 45 of the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, Article 29 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 5 of the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education, Article 22 of the 1976 Recommendation on

3 See Education for all: Achieving the goal – The Amman Affirmation, June 1996 (16-19 June 1996). The same document acknowledged that issues pertaining to gender gap in education, early childhood care and out-of-school literacy and education programmes for adolescents and adults remained important challenges that required a renewed effort,

4 These goals are: (1) expand and improve early childhood care and education, (2) provide free and compulsory universal primary education by 2015, (3) equitable access to learning and life-skills programmes, (4) achieve a 50 percent improvement in adult literacy rates, (5) eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and at all levels by 2015 and (6) improve all aspects of the quality of education.

5 Enrolments in primary schools in sub-Saharan Africa increased by 36 percent between 1999 and 2005, and governments in 14 countries abolished primary tuition fees, whilst public expenditure on education increased by 5 percent in sub-Saharan Africa and the number of out of school children dropped sharply since 2002.

6 The number of people lacking basic literacy skills has barely changed over the last two decades, whilst an estimated 72 million children of primary school age, or 10 percent of the world’s children of that age, did not attend any school at all in 2005.

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Kozol (1985: 37-39) explains that the census bureau reported literacy rates of 99 percent based on personal interviews of a relatively small portion of the population and on written responses to census bureau mailings. If the interviewees or written responders had completed fifth grade they were considered literate.

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) assessment defines literacy as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”

Others call this “nationism”, in the mythical belief that there is such a thing as a “neutral” language (see Fishman, J., 1968).

On 2 January 2007, the government of Rwanda committed to provide one laptop per child to all primary school children within five years.

The organization estimated last year that only 17 percent of the original 4 billion network addresses remained available. And it predicted that it would run out of new addresses within the next five years.

For example, the Terminology Project based at the Kiswahili Institute of Dar-Es-Salaam (Tanzania), the African Languages and Cyberspace Project based in
Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), and the Lexicography Project based in Gaborone (Botswana).


16 Ibid.