The nexus between education, learning, and language

Paulin G. Djité,
Ph.D., Palmes Académiques
University of Western Sydney, Australia
Email: p.djite@uws.edu.au
Philosophy

“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) Theme song of the Australian Channel 10 TV series “Saving Kids”
Premise 1

- Multilingualism is the most prominent feature of speech communities in Africa, but the education of the African child is still locked into a monolingual policy of language substitution.

- This policy wrongly assumes that all learners possess *the same* backgrounds and experiences.
Language, education and learning in Africa are far more than a desire or a means of preserving cultural and linguistic diversity.

Languages are not an artefact of the school curriculum, but fundamental to imparting knowledge and know-how.
Premise 3

- Living on borrowed tongues = Living on borrowed times!
It is (high) time 1

- Language is strategically important in building inclusive knowledge societies and in making progress in attaining sustainable endogenous development.

- The time has come for a much needed paradigm shift, and for practical solutions to language-in-education policy.
It is (high) time 2

- Language-in-education policy needs to be better targeted, to create a truly and lifelong learning society.

- Education must be responsive to the immediate realities of the learners, as well as to those of a globalising and changing world.
Forward-looking

- The immediate and practical language needs 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.

- Eliminating the linguistic hegemony of the rich over the poor through education, literacy and learning is the first step to reducing poverty.
Economy: IMF and World Bank Experts were of the view that governments in developing countries distorted market forces by giving access to grain banks and fertilisers to their farmers. This approach that led to the dumping of cheap products from developed countries.

Linguistic: For five decades now, we have been witnessing a push for developing countries in Africa to depend entirely on European languages in their educational systems and given up their own languages.
How?

Examine emerging opportunities for innovation in education and learning to better integrate local languages as media of instruction.
The current state of affairs

- Increase in primary school enrolments and a decline in the numbers of children out-of-school, but...

- For 129 countries, 25 or two-thirds in sub-Saharan Africa, are far from achieving Education For All (See Education For All Development Index)
In 17 of these countries, less than 63 percent of pupils reached the last grade of primary school.

Many more children are dropping out before grade 5, or graduate without mastering basic cognitive skills.
50 percent of school-aged children are not attending school in West and Central Africa (UNESCO (2000)).

1 out of 3 children is not attending school in Eastern and Southern Africa UNESCO (2000).
The overall rate of attrition is 25 percent, and the dropout rate is also 25 percent of the school age population.

Lowest performances in the world, with only 60 pupils out of 100 able to complete primary school, and only 30 competent in the basic learning skills.
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

In Burkina Faso, children average 2.9 years of schooling (3.5 years for boys and 2.3 years for girls).
In Kenya, since 2003, 22 percent of school age children, or 1.7 million children are still not going to school.

In Malawi, of those children who attend school, only 10 percent can understand the school curriculum.
sub-Saharan Africa will be burdened with some 57 million children out of school.

sub-Saharan Africa is not on track to achieve the six Education for All goals.
What does this mean?

- The formulation of an appropriate language-in-education policy is therefore critical to successful education and the survival and development of a polity.

- Educational deprivation threatens to consign the continent to an increasingly marginal future.
What does this mean?

- Competence in the language of education is a significant factor in learning and in capacity-building.

- 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.
Case in point: Health Literacy

What is Health Literacy?

- Patient’s ability to read and understand instructions on prescription drug bottles, appointment slips, medical education brochures, doctor’s directions and consent forms.

- Patient’s 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.
Case in point: Health Literacy

What happens?

- Lack 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.
Findings 1

- Literacy in USA = 99 percent; however,

- 21 to 23 percent of adult Americans 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.
Findings 2

- A follow-up study showed that there was no statistically significant improvement in these figures (Kutner, Greenberg, and Baer, 2005).

- Likewise, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (25 June 2008), the health of many Australians is threatened by their inability to read and write.
Findings 3

- Lack of basic literacy skills = much more likely 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).
Findings 4

“death rates for chronic diseases, communicable diseases and injuries are all conversely related to education for men and women” Rudd, Moeykens and Colton (2000)

Health illiteracy = lack of information about where to go for help and when to seek help (Williams et al., 1995)
Health illiteracy = making less informed decisions than others about treatment options, and being unable to participate effectively in two way communication with health care providers (Pfizer, 2002).

Health illiteracy = highly correlates with the adults’ ability to look after the welfare of their own children (Grosse & Auffrey, 1989; Weiss, Hart, McGee & D'Estelle, 1992; Moon et al., 1998).

Finally, maternal health illiteracy is strongly associated with malnutrition, low immunization rates, and high infant mortality (Arya & Devi, 1991; Foege & Henderson, 1986).
Why bring this up?

- Even in the developed world, limited literacy is an inhibiting factor in, amongst other things, accessing health information.

- If this is true for the developed world, where the majority are believed to interact and access public services in their own mother tongue, one can only imagine the negative impact of the lack, not only of health literacy, but of literacy in general, in sub-Saharan Africa.
Well-meaning patients in sub-Saharan Africa are not able to take medications as directed, not only because they do not understand the directions, dosage, or interactions with other prescriptions, but also because they do not even understand the European language 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 warnings are written.
Recent developments in Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) can contribute to the management of multilingualism and how local languages can be used to make education a lever of development.

Recent developments in ICTs provide a pathway for accessing new knowledge articulated in the language(s) of the African child.

Recent developments in ICTs offer the technical tools to bridge the digital divide that held back African languages.
Initiative 1: The One Laptop per Child (OLPC) project (inexpensive computers)

Initiative 2: May 2008, second generation OLPC, called XO-2 or XO-XO to become available in 2010 (cost around US$75).

Initiative 3: June 2008, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), voted to open up the Internet naming convention (to start in third quarter of 2009).
The ICANN vote means that new domain names can be written in other languages (e.g.; Asian and Arabic scripts).

This also means that, together with software localisation and terminology work, the possibility to provide versions of this technology in languages specific to the receiving countries.
Looking into the future 4

- Hence, ownership of this technology is possible in African languages and bolster the case for linguistic plurality in information technology.
Conclusion 1

- Language, education and learning go to the heart of how we make education and technology transfer inclusive.

- Language, education and learning are fundamental to how we help learners and teachers interact more naturally and negotiate meanings in ways that improve the effectiveness of the learning process (Baker, 2001: 238).

- Language, education and learning are essential to how we make the educational experience of young and old of greater relevance to their daily life.
Conclusion 2

- Language, education and learning are the key to facilitating greater participation of the people in their community at local and national levels.

- 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.
Learning a language or learning through a language should help people understand the practical use of fertiliser and increase the production of maize or rice (der Walt, 2006: 170).

Learning a language or learning through a language should improve reproductive health, avoid the curse of preventable and deadly diseases, whilst helping children pass geometry, mathematics or science tests (der Walt, 2006: 170).
Philosophy again

- 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.
Therefore...

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