Multilingualism is a gift, a resource. No one knows this better than Africans do. The uses of one’s own mother tongue are characterized by deep understanding, richness of speech forms and metaphor, familiar concepts. Uses of other languages permit communication with others, broadened access to knowledge outside one’s own cultural milieu, and participation in civic entities beyond one’s own community. Multilingualism contributes to the reinforcement of one’s own, local identity in order to permit healthy engagement with the rest of the world; in fact that is its primary advantage relative to globalization.

However in the developing world, stable multilingualism is only possible when the language that carries lesser political capital is intentionally, institutionally supported. Those languages (termed here ‘local languages’ in an attempt to avoid the political implications of terms such as minority, vernacular, and indigenous) must be promoted in national language policy and included in the education system. When this is not done the ‘default’ processes of language loss, and wholesale assimilation to the languages of globalization, quickly take hold.

The intentional, systematic use of the local language in contexts of education and learning has multiple points of impact on a society, particularly in contexts where the local language has suffered from relatively low prestige and little tradition of written use.

**Impact on development**

The term ‘development’ has a variety of definitions, ranging from economic reform to enhanced human agency. Development that is described as “human-centered” development implies the enlargement of people’s choices (UNDP 1990:10) or the expansion of human capabilities (Sen 1999). Describing development this way highlights the importance of a range of locally-held competencies - those which facilitate successful knowledge acquisition, understanding, clear communication, and the ability to evaluate new ideas and alternatives. These parameters of successful development in turn speak strongly to the importance of local language-mediated learning as an essential component of the development process. Indeed, as Robinson (1996:4) argues, “wherever people are put at the centre of the development process, issues of language will always be close to the surface”.

This argument gains more significance in view of the fact that current efforts for sustainable development are not always finding success in the two-thirds world – and that learning contexts in the developing world are not yet adequate to sustain those development efforts. The 2008 World Development Report notes that low education levels, particularly in rural areas, continue to inhibit economic development (World Bank 2007:9). The more specifically education-focused development goals, those of Education for All (EFA), show even less encouraging trends. According to the 2008 mid-term review of EFA goals, both literacy and educational quality (the focus of two of the six EFA goals) are seriously lagging behind EFA targets. Not only so, but the goal of gender parity in education is also being missed (EFA GMR 2008: 8). Given these pessimistic assessments of the effectiveness of education, both
formal and nonformal, it seems that more attention to the role of language choice in
development and in the acquisition of knowledge would be highly appropriate. As Djité
(2008: 180) states, “sustainable development will not be achieved at the expense of the people
of Africa, or at the expense of their languages” (emphasis added).

Impact on language maintenance
Intentional integration of a local language into learning contexts, and into the formal
education system in particular, implies a significant degree of development of that language –
which in turn has significant effects on the vitality of the language (Spolsky 2004: 189).
Corpus planning activities that are key to the successful use of local language as a medium of
instruction include development of a useable writing system, production of dictionaries and
grammatical descriptions, language modernization (the expansion of the lexical inventory to
include mathematical, scientific and other conceptual terms), the recording of local-language
terminology that is in danger of being lost, and production of written materials in that
language. Languages of greater prestige and wider use in the world typically have a
development history that includes all of these activities, but thousands of local languages
around the world do not. It is easily seen, then, that integrating local languages into the
school environment involves processes that stabilize and give greater instrumental capacity
and prestige to those languages.

As a researcher in northwest Cameroon, I was privileged to witness some of these language
development activities in some of the Cameroonian languages of the area. One day I watched
a group of 14 Bafut school teachers compiling animal names in the Bafut language (Trudell
2006a: 630):

A teacher is leading the [group] in an exercise of writing the names
of animals - wild and domestic - in Bafut. [Literacy supervisor] John
Ambe tells me that the purpose of this is that people normally learn
the names in English, and they don’t always remember them in
Bafut: ‘if you ask someone, maybe they can only name five [animals]
in Bafut. So we are working together here to remember them and
write them down correctly in Bafut language. We did [the same
process for] plants yesterday.’

More than 40 wild animals are named during the session. At one
point, there is some uncertainty about the precise spelling of the
Bafut word for pangolin: Is it mbaranga’a or ambaranga’a? They
say it over and over to each other and finally decide on the first
spelling. Then they talk about what the animal looks like… It occurs
to me that I am watching the standardization of the Bafut language in
progress.

In another instance observed, Bafut grammar as taught in the upper primary grades aimed to
enhance students’ appreciation of the complexity and linguistic adequacy of their mother
tongue (ibid. p. 631):

In one Grade 7 class, the PROPELCA teacher taught the 12 verb
tenses in Bafut first by eliciting them from the students, then asking
for the English names of those that correspond to English verb tenses.
It became clear that Bafut has more verb tenses than English does.
The teacher pointed this out at the end of the class: “Bafut does have
grammar, just as English has. In fact, it has a more complex system
of tenses.”
Enhancement of the use of local language in learning contexts is important for both maintenance of the language itself and a strengthened sense of the value of that language among its speakers (Trudell 2006b:199).

**Impact on academic outcomes**

Research – both quantitative and qualitative - is plentiful concerning the beneficial impact of using a child’s first language on cognitive and academic outcomes in school. Admittedly, as Diarra (2003) states with regard to Angola, in-depth study is hardly necessary to see that poor results in L2-medium classrooms are often directly related to the lack of student fluency in the language of instruction. Nevertheless, studies that track educational outcomes of the use of a child’s first language show astonishing consistency in their conclusions. One well known longitudinal study done in the United States by researchers Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier gives clear evidence that the longer a child is taught in his or her home language, the higher his or her achievement will be throughout school (Thomas and Collier 2002; 1997). Studies in the developing world, if not as statistically rigorous, are no less convincing. For example, evaluations of the Malian government’s program of *Pedagogie Convergente* (convergent pedagogy, a bilingual education model) indicate that children taught in their mother tongue achieve substantially better exam results in mathematics and French compared to their peers who are taught in French-medium classrooms; they are reported to be more enthusiastic, active learners as well (UNESCO 2008). This conclusion is repeated in many program assessments across the continent (see for example Fafunwa et al 1989; Benson 2002; Williams 2006).

The principle behind such education programs is simple: learning should start with the known and move to the unknown. Thus, teaching a child new content must be done in a language he or she knows well. Teaching new content in an unknown language can only end in frustration for student and teacher – as millions of learners across the developing world can testify. Giving a child the needed time to develop his or her cognitive ability in L1 allows that child to learn new content more easily, as well as enabling him or her to learn second and even third languages throughout his or her academic career.

**Impact on national citizenship**

For speakers of the politically minoritized languages of the world, participation in the affairs of the nation depends on their ability to think critically, to process written information, and to speak the language(s) of power as well as their own languages. As a colleague from South Africa recently said, “despite their constitutional rights, speakers of African languages simply are not heard.”¹ This political invisibility is certainly language-linked, as Mozambican scholar Sozinho Matsinhe has observed:

> the use of [international languages] allows only a vertical approach to political interaction; the minority who speak them control the majority who do not. Using local languages allows more horizontal interaction, and the level of debate changes altogether.²

This situation speaks to the need to develop minoritized languages in order to increase their speakers’ access to processes of national citizenship, and it also speaks to the need to enhance people’s access to fluency in the language of power. Integration of the local language into education systems as a medium of instruction, along with deliberate and programmed second

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¹ Dr. Chimane Tlale, North West University, South Africa; 8 July 2008.  
² Prof. Sozinho Matsinhe, University of South Africa, Johannesburg; 9 July 2008.
language acquisition, is an effective way to ensure fluency in the second language as well as enhancing instrumental uses of the first language in social and political contexts.

Among speakers of some minority languages in Senegal, the desire for national citizenship and participation in national affairs is partly responsible for the popularity of literacy classes in local languages (Trudell and Klaas 2007: 9). In these language communities, both formal and nonformal mother-tongue medium learning is perceived to have positive effects on the social and political mainstreaming and legitimization of the community. This is seen to happen in three ways:

- the mitigation of the educational inequalities which members of such communities face in the formal education system, related to language of instruction - what Johnson and Stewart (2007:247) call “horizontal inequalities”;
- the fact that development of the local language, culminating in ‘codified’ status by the national government, gives it legitimacy and standing in the eyes of the nation;
- the belief that use of local languages in school will allow more children of these language communities to succeed academically and so participate in national society as equals. Local-language literacy programs appear to be providing an avenue for attaining some measure of success in the national education system, as learning in the mother tongue is used as a bridge for transferring literacy and other skills into French. Far from setting themselves up as providers of alternative education or bastions of cultural isolationism, promoters of local-language development and literacy are putting considerable effort into helping students from their communities to succeed in French-medium school and to integrate successfully into national life.

In conclusion, the fact that the forces of globalization have given rise to parallel processes of localization and decentralization serves as an important indicator of the strength and importance of the local – including local language and culture. Adejunmobi (2004:161) accurately captures the linguistic versatility and pragmatism of Africans in the face of these two forces of globalization and localization:

> Citizens of poor countries who operate in markets impacted by global capital have reason to learn new languages, but also to retain distinct and localised identities. They have reason to become conversant with other cultures while avoiding complete assimilation into such cultures.

The intentional development and use of local languages in education and learning strengthens this adaptability of developing-world citizens, allowing them to survive and even thrive in their world today.
References


