

## **Moving towards bilingual education in Africa**

John Clegg

### **Introduction**

I want to propose that in sub-Saharan Africa we need to stop teaching through European languages alone and introduce bilingual education, that is, learning through two languages throughout schooling.

I'm going to generalise, but there is academic evidence for most of what I will claim. I'll often refer to English, but what I say applies to any European language used as a medium of instruction (MoI) in Africa. I'll use L1 as a shorthand for an African language in which the learner feels comfortable and I'll use L2 as a shorthand for English or any other European language used as a MoI.

This chapter makes points which are similar to those which I made in a paper presented to the Sixth Language in Development conference in Tashkent in 2003 (Clegg 2005). However, it adds to the Tashkent paper in two respects. Firstly it points out that education programmes which function in the learners' L2 tend to succeed only under certain circumstances, most of which are not given in sub-Saharan Africa (see the section 'What factors in school achievement can be linked to the language of learning?' below). Secondly, it draws attention to doubts about the value of 'early-exit' L1-medium education; that is to say, the short-term initial experience of learning in L1 which learners conventionally get in many African countries (see the section 'Does L1-medium education in the early years significantly raise school achievement?' below). This phase of schooling, which we often think of as crucially valuable to the African learner, now seems not to be beneficial enough to offset the drawbacks of education in a European language.

These are the questions I want to discuss:

- Can African learners get a satisfactory education in current L2-medium classrooms?
- What factors in school achievement can be linked to the language of learning?
- Do African classrooms fulfil the conditions which education in L2 requires?
- How should teachers teach subjects to learners who are not competent in the L2?
- Can education in L2 damage communities?
- Does L1-medium education in the early years significantly raise school achievement?
- What are the pros and cons of bilingual education?
- Do stakeholders in Africa know enough about the language of learning?
- What action should we take now to introduce bilingual education?

### **Can African learners get a satisfactory education in current L2-medium classrooms?**

You can't learn if you don't understand lessons and you can't teach if you're not confident enough in the language of learning. Currently, in African classrooms:

- learners often have low L2 ability, especially in the language of learning (Brock-Utne & Alidou 2006; Heugh 1995, 1999, 2001, 2006)
- teachers are often not confident in the L2 (Mwinsheikhe 2002)
- learners often do little talking, reading and writing in the L2 (Alidou & Brock-Utne 2006).

There is evidence that levels of L2 ability for learning as well as for teaching are often too low to ensure that learners get an adequate education (Alidou & Brock-Utne 2006). Language is at the heart of school learning. If you can't use it for the purpose of learning, it becomes a barrier to, rather than a channel for education.

In addition, what learners are asked to do with language in many African classrooms is often not cognitively useful. For example:

- classroom discourse is often low in meaning; learners do a lot of repetition and memorisation (Alidou & Brock-Utne 2006)
- lessons are often cognitively unchallenging (Brock-Utne & Alidou 2006; Hornberger & Chick 2001; UNESCO 2005).

Thus learners are often engaging in activities of doubtful pedagogical benefit in a language which they do not know well enough.

### **What factors in school achievement can be linked to the language of learning?**

In Africa:

- the numbers of children out of school are high (Bamgbose 2000)
- matriculation rates are low (UNESCO 2005)
- literacy rates are low (Bamgbose 2000; Williams 1996)
- dropout rates are high (Bamgbose 2000)
- levels of education at university entrance are low (Rollnick & Manyatsi 1997).

Evidence links these factors to education in a European language (Brock-Utne 2002; Harlech-Jones 2001; Williams & Cooke 2002). They do have other obvious causes (e.g. poverty, resourcing, etc) but unfortunately – because authorities do not, by and large, discuss the language medium question (Dutcher 2001) – we tend to overlook the linguistic causes.

### **Do African classrooms fulfil the conditions which education in L2 requires?**

When we look at L2-medium education across the world, there is evidence that it flourishes under certain conditions. L2-medium education can work:

- if you come from an educated background (Brock-Utne 2002; Tollefson 1991). Many African learners don't.
- if you have good foundations in early L1 literacy (Cummins 2000; Thomas & Collier 2002). Many African learners, although they may learn through L1 in the early years, may not have L1 foundations which are secure enough to enable them to learn successfully through L2 (Heugh 2006).
- if you have adequate exposure to the L2 (Cummins & Swain 1986). Many African learners – especially in rural, but also in urban areas – have low exposure (Trappes-Lomax 1990).

- if you already have a good level of L2 ability when you switch to learning subjects in L2. For many African learners the gap at this switch of medium - between their L2 language ability and the language they need to learn subjects - is very large and can increase (Macdonald 1990).
- if English language teachers teach the language you need to learn subjects (Cummins 2000). Most English teachers – in Africa or elsewhere – don't; they tend to teach grammar and general-purpose English.
- if subject teachers teach subjects using a specialist language-supportive pedagogy (Clegg 2001) which makes subject concepts accessible to learners who are still developing in the L2. (See also the section 'How should teachers teach subjects to learners who are not competent in the L2?' below.) Subject-teachers in Africa – as in other L2-medium contexts – normally don't (Clegg 1996, 2001).
- if textbooks are designed to be used by learners still developing in the L2; that means that they use techniques to make them highly comprehensible, especially visuals, readable texts and language supportive tasks (Peacock 1995). Often, African textbooks are not designed in such a way.
- if teacher-education makes the above issues central to the training of teachers. It normally doesn't; much of teacher-education in Africa is not orientated to training teachers to teach subjects in L2 (Alidou & Brock-Utne 2006; Heugh 2006).
- if resourcing is adequate. In Africa, often it isn't; textbook supply, furniture, class size etc are often poor.

These are crucial facts of life about education in a L2. However, for the most part, education authorities and aid agencies in Africa do not address these issues (see the section 'Do stakeholders in Africa know enough about the language of learning?' below). There is a remarkable absence of information or debate on these matters (Dutcher 2001). Since L2-medium education in Africa, as it is currently practised, does not fulfil most of these criteria for success, theoretical and practical experience would predict that it will not work effectively and it is unsurprising that its results are poor.

### **How should teachers teach subjects to learners who are not competent in the L2?**

When teachers teach a subject in a L2, they need to use a pedagogy which is different from the one they use when working in L1. This pedagogy is designed to help learners understand the subject when their L2 ability is still developing (i.e. sometimes zero, often middling) and to use some L2 to express themselves on the subject. This is a specialist pedagogy (Clegg 2001) which needs to be specifically taught in teacher-education. It requires teachers to:

- talk in a super-comprehensible way (using, for example, signals of organisation, summary, example, explanation, repetition, code-switching into L1, etc)
- use a lot of visuals
- use tasks which explicitly support language development (Burkett et al. 2001)
- develop reading and writing abilities within the subject in the L2
- get learners to talk in groups, often in their L1
- teach learners to use the language of learning
- teach learners strategies for learning in a L2.

By and large, subject teachers in African teacher-education – as is the case in many other L2-medium education contexts across the world – are not trained to use this pedagogy (Clegg 1996).

### **Can education in L2 damage communities?**

If we teach in L2, we run several risks. There is a danger that:

- we limit school achievement; there is a low ceiling on what learners can learn in a language in which they are not competent.
- we delay school achievement; learners working in L2 take several years to develop competence in the language of learning. For example, Cummins (2000) suggests that seven years are needed to develop this competence in North America.
- we reinforce unequal access to the curriculum; children who speak L2 better can get an education; those who speak it less well are held back.
- we reinforce power relations in society (Roy-Campbell 2001); middle class children thrive in education in L2, but children from families with low socio-economic status don't.
- we amplify the effects of poverty; children from poor families experience education in L2 as a greater barrier than children from rich families (Dutcher 2001).
- we break the bond between school and community; parents cannot easily involve themselves in their children's education if it is conducted in a language they may not speak well (Dutcher 2001).
- we downgrade the child's language and culture (Dutcher 2001); a language which is not used for education is an undervalued language.
- we inhibit school improvement initiatives; initiatives have less impact if language places a fundamental brake on school achievement.
- we commit resources where they cannot do much good; a lot of money spent on school improvement is wasted if there is a fundamental, unrecognised linguistic limit on quality.
- we distort data on educational performance. If we assess children in a second language it may not tell us what they know; furthermore, it may not tell us what they might know if they had been educated in their L1.
- we reduce the effectiveness of teacher-education; whatever teacher-educators train teachers to do, it will not be effective if learners don't understand lessons.
- we contribute to limiting the economic performance of a country (Alexander 2001a, 2001b); low school achievement is serious for the economy.

All these risks are real in current L2-medium education in Africa.

### **Does L1-medium education in the early years significantly raise school achievement?**

In most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, children learn through their L1 in the early years and then (usually after three or four years) they switch medium to a European language. It is widely considered that this has the following advantages:

- It provides a connection to their community and culture (Brock-Utne & Alidou 2006).
- It provides cognitive and literacy foundations for education as a whole.
- It is an essential foundation for education in a L2 (Thomas & Collier 2002) (but especially for children with low socio-economic status (SES), for whom it has an important compensatory value).
- It is an essential foundation for second language learning.

However, early years education in L1, without continuing L1-medium education in cognitively demanding subjects, is unlikely to raise school achievement overall. Indeed 'early-exit' L1-medium education (e.g. after three years) is now considered by many specialists to be insufficiently effective in terms of academic achievement compared to late-exit models or continuous bilingual education (Dutcher & Tucker 1996; Ramirez et al 1991). Some commentators believe that this is particularly true of African education (Heugh 2006), where six years of L1-medium education are thought to be the minimum needed for L2-medium education to be effective.

Two concepts are useful here. One is CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency; see Cummins 2000). This is a contested term, but it serves to point up the fact that school makes particular language demands on learners: they need to use a special variety of language for learning purposes. This includes reading school texts, planning and writing academic texts, listening to teachers and taking notes, conducting effective groupwork, using charts and graphs, writing examination responses, etc.

The second useful concept is 'transfer'. CALP can transfer from one language to another (Cummins 1984): key elements of these skills are not specific to languages. But this happens only under certain conditions. Firstly, the skills must be well enough taught in the L1. Secondly, this teaching must continue for a long enough time for L1 CALP to establish firm foundations (Rubagumya 2003).

In addition, Cummins (2000) claims that effective bilingual education requires teachers to give extra emphasis to CALP in both L1-medium and L2-medium parts of a bilingual education. In other words, learners need to be encouraged to develop CALP in L2. In L2-medium learning, learners cannot do without being shown explicitly how to do use learning skills in the L2. This means that L2 teaching – throughout schooling, but especially in the early years before the switch of medium – needs to focus on this variety of language. Very often, early years L2 lessons in African classrooms are not intended to do this; instead, they are intended to teach general-purpose, rather than academic-purpose language.

So the current model of early-onset L2-medium education may not be effective. It may not be long enough and it may not focus sufficiently on academic learning skills either in L1 or L2.

### **What are the pros and cons of bilingual education?**

If we think of what bilingual education in Africa might look like, ideally, we would most likely envisage:

- early years education in L1
- continuing education with the curriculum divided between two languages.

The benefits which are commonly claimed for bilingual education are that it can:

- increase school achievement generally by enabling learners to learn partly in L1 (Alidou & Brock-Utne 2006)
- increase learners' ability to develop CALP skills in both L1 and L2
- increase L2-medium achievement; learning skills gained in L1 can transfer better to L2-medium education in a bilingual education system than they can in the current model of early-years L1-medium learning followed by L2-medium education (partly because these learning skills have longer to develop in L1 and partly because learners develop them concurrently in both L1 and L2)
- increase the status of African languages (Wolff 2006)
- maintain children's language and culture (Dutcher 2001)
- maintain a link with the community (Dutcher 2001).

On the other hand, the problems which are often quoted in relation to bilingual education in Africa include the following:

- Publishing textbooks will be expensive
- African languages cannot express school concepts
- Parents may not accept it.

There is undoubtedly a cost to bilingual school publishing (Diallo 2006), but it is lower than normally expected and certainly lower than the overall cost to the economy of ineffective L2-medium education (Heugh 2006; Heugh & Siegrühn 1995). Bilingual publishing is also practically less difficult than is often imagined. In fact, early years multilingual publishing is practised in contexts in which many languages are used (e.g. Papua New Guinea; see Siegel 1997).

African languages do indeed need to be developed in order to express academic concepts, but the processes by which such language development is achieved are already well-known (Heugh & Siegrühn 1995; Mwansoko 1990; Wolff 2006). It is mainly political will which is required to put them into practice.

It is also true that many parents may be wary of education in two languages (Wolff 2006). They may feel that bilingual education marginalises L2. In fact – as outlined above – the opposite is the case. Current L2-medium education limits school L2 use whilst bilingual education promotes it. But this is a paradox; it is not easily understood by governments and may be even less accepted by parents. What is needed is a campaign of public information to educate parents about the value of bilingual education. In addition, it is important to pilot bilingual education (see the section 'What action should we take now to introduce bilingual education?' below) so that parents are able to appreciate its value.

### **Do stakeholders in Africa know enough about the language of learning?**

Stakeholders in African education – especially governments and educational development agencies – need to be informed about the pros and cons of the choice of medium of instruction.

They need to know in particular about:

- the value of bilingual education (see the section ‘What are the pros and cons of bilingual education?’ above)
- the conditions of success for education in L2 (see the section ‘Do African classrooms fulfil the conditions which education in L2 requires?’ above)
- the relation between English-medium education and SES (again, see the section ‘Do African classrooms fulfil the conditions which education in L2 requires?’)
- the potential damage to communities of education in L2 (see the section ‘Can education in L2 damage communities?’ above)
- an effective pedagogy in L2-medium education (see the section ‘How should teachers teach subjects to learners who are not competent in the L2?’ above)
- the importance of early years education in L1 (see the section ‘Does L1-medium education in the early years significantly raise school achievement’ above)
- the ineffectiveness of a short period of early years education in L1 (again, see the section ‘Does L1-medium education in the early years significantly raise school achievement’).

In Africa (and indeed elsewhere) governments and other key institutions in the education service tend to be ill-informed about the role of language in learning and about the choice of language medium (Dutcher 2001; Wolff 2006). This lack of knowledge is especially marked:

- amongst governments (Dutcher 2001)
- in teacher education (Heugh 2006)
- amongst parents (Wolff 2006).

Recently, knowledge of these matters has been on the increase:

- amongst development agencies such as UNESCO (see UNESCO 2005, 2006)
- in higher education in Africa – for example at the University of Cape Town (e.g. Beckett 2001)
- amongst relevant NGOs: The Association for the Development of Education in Africa, for example, has contributed powerfully (e.g. Alidou et al 2006)

However, the lack of knowledge about language of learning amongst governments, parents and teacher educators is still a major barrier to increasing school achievement in Africa.

### **What action should we take now to introduce bilingual education?**

We need to plan now for bilingual education in the longer term. This means:

- starting to plan African languages so that they are available as media of school learning
- informing the public about the importance of language choice in education
- educating teachers about language choice in education, about the value of bilingual education and about how to teach subjects in L2
- designing bilingual curricula
- expanding textbook publishing in L1 and establishing in L2-medium publishing the principle of comprehensibility to L2 users.

We need also to show that bilingual education can work. This means starting now to pilot small-scale bilingual education projects (Dutcher 2001). A pilot would involve:

- choosing a small number of sample schools
- establishing a consensus within those schools of the nature and intended value of the pilot
- supporting the teachers in those schools in the devising of a bilingual curriculum, the development of L1-medium materials, the assessment of knowledge in two languages, and so on
- monitoring the project over time.

Education in European languages is not working in Africa and we need to recognise it. It is no longer legitimate to avoid the debate on the language of learning. Bilingual education can raise school achievement and we need to move urgently towards it now.

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## Contents

- Chapter 1 Introduction : Language and the silent observers of development . . . 1  
*Hywel Coleman*

### Strand 1 : Multilingualism and questioning the role of English

- Chapter 2 Language use optimisation as a strategy for national development . . . 1  
*Herman M. Batibo*

- Chapter 3 Language policy in selected African countries : Achievements  
and constraints . . . . . 1  
*Hélène Fatima Idris, Karsten Legère and Tove Rosendal*

- Chapter 4 Moving towards bilingual education in Africa . . . . . 1  
*John Clegg*

- Chapter 5 The impact of learning with the mother tongue on academic  
achievement : A case study of Grade 8 students in Ethiopia . . . . . 1  
*Teshome Nekatibeb*

- Chapter 6 Mother tongue and other tongue in primary education : Can  
equity be achieved with the use of different languages? . . . . . 1  
*Gideon P.E. Cohen*

- Chapter 7 English as the language *for* development in Pakistan : Issues,  
challenges and possible solutions . . . . . 1  
*Fauzia Shamim*

### Strand 2 : Language in critical and post-conflict contexts

- Chapter 8 Language, disasters and development . . . . . 1  
*Psyche Kennett*

- Chapter 9 The role of English in the post-war development of Sudan . . . . . 1  
*Mohamed Hassan Dardig*

- Chapter 10 Lessons from a training project in war-affected areas of Sri Lanka . . . 1  
*Richard Lunt and Amy Hamlyn*

### Strand 3 : Language and development projects and their design

- Chapter 11 Words, power and the personal in development . . . . . 1  
*Robert Chambers*

|              |   |   |
|--------------|---|---|
| Chapter 12   | The dangers of matrix thinking in international curriculum project design . . . . .                       | 1 |
|              | <i>Adrian Holliday</i>  |   |
| Chapter 13   | Resistance in ‘English for Academic Purposes’ classrooms at the Ethiopian Civil Service College . . . . . | 1 |
|              | <i>Nigussie Negash</i>  |   |
| Chapter 14   | Ethiopian teachers’ evaluation of a language improvement programme . . . . .                              | 1 |
|              | <i>Ahmed Siraj, Almaz Baraki and Judith Altshul</i>   |   |
| Chapter 15   | Telling stories, understanding lives, working toward change . . . .                                       | 1 |
|              | <i>Kath Copley, Graham Haylor and William Savage</i>  |   |
| Contributors | . . . . .   | 1 |