

PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES OF THE L1: EXPERIENCES AT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD LEVEL AT TAMALE MUNICIPALITY OF GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the perception of early childhood educators in the Tamale municipality of Northern Ghana on the place and use of Dagbani (L1) as a tool of instruction at the early childhood level. The study adopted the quantitative research approach of the survey-type design. One hundred and ninety-nine (199) early childhood educators were conveniently sampled from 38 public and private early childhood centres in the Tamale municipality. Among the objectives that informed the study was to determine early childhood educators' capacity to teach using L1, to determine how early childhood educators perceive L1 pedagogical use at the early childhood level, and also to elicit suggestions from early childhood educators on how L1 pedagogical practices can be encouraged. Data obtained through questionnaire were analysed and the results of the analysis of the data revealed that majority of educators lacked the capacity to teach using L1 because they were not trained in L1 pedagogical practices and that scarcely did they teach using L1. Again, there was a vast difference between educators from private and public schools relative to whether L1 should be used as a medium of instruction at the early childhood level. Among some recommendations provided in this study regarding promoting L1 pedagogical use include; training of educators in L1 use, sensitization of parents on the benefits of L1 pedagogy, printing of teaching learning-materials and texts in local languages.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Dagbani, Mother Tongue, Pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

While there are so many factors that contribute to the delivery of quality teaching and learning in the classroom, language arguably is deemed the most effective ingredient in the direction of efficient instruction (McLaughlin, 1987). Studies in the area of language-teaching-learning efficiency suggest that when children are taught in a language that they understand and relate with, it enhances classroom participation, positive effect, and increases their self-esteem (Auerbach, 1993; Klaus, 2003; Young, 2009). Ghana, in recognition of the advantages associated with the use of language that learners understand, has made it a policy that instruction at the lower primary level (Primary One – Primary Three) of which early childhood education (kindergarten) is part, should be a combination of the prevailing local

dialect (L1) of where a school is situated and English Language (L2) which serves as the official language of the nation.

Historically, Ghana has struggled to maintain a consistent policy on which language/s should be used for instruction especially at the lower primary level. According to McGroarty (2008), upon the attainment of independence, Ghana, like most African countries, adopted a single language approach hinged on the principle of a unified nation-state with the mindset of it being a vehicle for economic development. This position regarding language of instruction especially at the lower primary level has fluctuated over time. Currently, the policy as it stands is that instruction at the lower primary level should be a combination of an approved Indigenous language (L1) and that of the English language (L2). Thus, the extent to which this policy is adhered to by both public/government funded early childhood centres, and privately owned early childhood setups within the Tamale municipality of Ghana served as the basis for this study.

Ghana's current policy regarding early childhood instruction can be described as bilingual. Bilingual in the sense that Ghana's Education Strategic Plan (2003-2015) aimed to ensure that learners at the primary school level, especially those at the lower primary gain fluency in their mother-tongue (L1) and in English (L2) (National Literacy Acceleration Programme; NALAP). NALAP's postulation regarding bilingual instruction requires that pupils first learn to read, write, and understand their first language (mother-tongue) before being exposed to the English language. NALAP's objective as stated in its policy document fell short in recommending L1 as the medium of instruction for all subjects at the early childhood level (Owu-Ewie, 2006). The policy calls for advancement in literacy and numeracy skills by early learners via the mother-tongue without mentioning the use of the mother-tongue as a tool of instruction in other subject areas.

A research by Cummins (2000) in the area of language pedagogy shows that using learners' mother-tongue is crucial to effective teaching and learning. Cummins argues that countries that use the mother-tongue as a means of instruction especially at the entry stages of their educational programs stand the chance of achieving the objectives of the Education for All program. Indeed, UNESCO (2000) asserts that countries in Sub-Saharan Africa that have maintained colonial languages in education tend to be the poorest, most illiterate, and most poorly educated countries. Hence, with the foregoing conclusions, this study sought to explore the following objectives:

- i. To determine whether early childhood educators in the Tamale municipality possess the requisite capacity to teach using L1?
- ii. To determine whether early childhood educators in the study area support the use of L1 as a tool of instruction at the early childhood level? And
- iii. To determine based on the perspectives of early childhood educators in the study area on how to encourage L1 use at the early childhood level?

Statement of the Problem

This study serves as a baseline assessment aimed at obtaining pedagogical practices of early childhood educators in the Tamale municipality of Ghana in their use of L1 as a means of instruction by comparing what pertains at the private sector with that of the public sector. Specifically, the problem the study aimed to address was to determine if there were any differences between early childhood educators in the private sector, and those of the public

sector in their L1 pedagogical practices especially on the backdrop that mother-tongue instruction is considered the most effective means of instruction at the entry stage of every educational program (Adebiyi, 2013). Hopefully, findings from this study might lead to new methodological approaches and changes in curriculum in the use of language of instruction especially at the early childhood level.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Upon attainment of independence, Ghana adopted English Language as the official language of instruction at all levels of the Ghanaian educational setup (Sarfor, 2012). This policy was changed with the introduction of the 1957 language policy of Ghana which states that; in the first three years of primary education, the Ghanaian language prevalent in the local area is to be used as the medium of instruction whilst English is studied as a subject (Owu-Ewie, 2006). Ghana's language policy has lacked consistency and has fluctuated overtime. In the year 2002, the Ministry of Education initiated a policy of an English only program where English served as the official language of instruction of all Ghanaian educational programs including early childhood education (Ministry of Education; Ghana, 2003). Currently, Ghana's language policy under the auspices of the National Accelerated Literacy Program makes it mandatory for instruction at the early childhood level to be more of the L1 (90%) and less of the L2 (10%) (Education Strategic Plan, 2003-2015; Ghana).

Mother tongue according to Cummins (2000) is the language that the child learns from home. It is described by Nyarigoti and Ambiyio (2014) as the child's first language, the language learnt at home from older members of the family. In some parts of the world such as Kenya, according to Cleghorn, Meritt, and Abagi (1989), mother tongue is often referred to as; "ethnic", "tribal", "local" or vernacular language. Ghana is argued to have about 68 indigenous languages framed into three language families; Gur, Mande, and Kwa (Lewis, Gary, & Fenning, 2013). Mother tongue based bilingual programs use the learners first language known as L1 to teach reading and writing skills based on academic content (Mwamwenda, 1996). There is sometimes the confusion in distinguishing mother tongue from indigenous language. Indigenous language unlike the description provided relative to mother tongue, is a language spoken uniquely by an indigenous community and with origins in a given community or country (Bunyi, 1999). Situations where an indigenous language is used as a baseline for teaching and done in tandem with another language which mostly is the official language is what is described by Huddy and Sears (1990) as bilingual instruction.

The benefits of mother tongue pedagogy as provided in the literature abounds. For instance, Klaus (2003) argues that using language that learners understand or can relate with increases their classroom participation, positive effect, and increase their self-esteem. For Patricia (2004), it is easier for learners to transfer their literacy skills to another language such as English especially if it was learnt in the first language. This position is upheld by Schwartz, Moin, and Leiken (2012), who argue that linguistic skills in L1 actually enhance the process of L2 learning. Again, as stated by Larson-Freeman (2001), children who receive instruction in their mother tongue especially in their early years do perform better than their colleagues who did not have such experiences. Put differently, Skutnabb-Kanyas (2000) opines, that instruction through a language that learners do not speak is regarded as submersion because according to the author, it is synonymous to holding learners under water without being taught how to swim.

Mother tongue instruction as seen in some quarters serves as a vehicle for teachers and learners to interact naturally by negotiating meanings through participatory learning, and this is deemed to be conducive for cognitive and linguistic development (Heugh, 2006; Noormahamadi, 2008). Bolitho (1983) argues that when instruction is conducted in children's native language it provides them the opportunity to say what they really want to say which otherwise would not have been possible if it was done in a different language. Undoubtedly, the benefits of mother tongue instruction in the areas of cognitive and intellectual development, as well as communication skills, and being a platform for effective teaching and learning as provided in the literature, cannot be underrated.

The above benefits notwithstanding, there are concerns in the literature regarding steps for mother tongue pedagogical incorporation into school curricula especially with developing countries where mostly a different language other than that of the community serves as the medium of instruction in schools. For example, according to a World Bank Report (2005), fifty percent of the world's out of school children live in communities where the language of instruction in schools is rarely used at home. Unfortunately, Africa according to Ouane and Glanz (2010), serves as the only continent where the majority of its children start schooling using a foreign language. This problem is compounded with concerns of teacher fluency and competency in the pedagogical nuances of using L1 as a means of instruction and most especially when combined with the L2 (Larson- Freeman, 2013). In a survey carried out by the National Centre for Research into Basic Education (2008), to determine teacher capacity to speak, read, and write a local language as required by Ghana's NALAP program, the conclusion was that most teachers who partook in this survey lacked the capacity to teach efficiently using L1. Factors that could contribute to this conclusion as well as how such factors play out in the Tamale municipality of Ghana among other reasons informed the conduct of this study. As a result, this study proceeded to address the following research questions:

1. Do early childhood educators in the Tamale municipality have the capacity to teach using L1 at the early childhood level?
2. Do early childhood educators in the Tamale municipality support the use of L1 as a means of instruction?
3. What suggestions based on the perspectives of early childhood educators can help promote L1 pedagogical practices at the Tamale municipality?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is quantitative research of the survey design. Quantitative data was collected using a self-report questionnaire that consisted of multiple-choice options for an item. In addition, participants also responded to a number of open-ended items that required further probing into the responses provided to the close-ended questions. Data gathered through close-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistics, while data collected via open-ended means were grouped under themes that emanated from responses by participants.

The sampling approach used in selecting the study population was convenience sampling. This approach was deemed appropriate because consideration was taken regarding the accessibility, willingness, and availability of participants (Gravetter, 2012). In all 240 early childhood educators agreed to participate in the study, hence, 240 participants were administered with the questionnaires but 199 of them returned their completed copies of the questionnaire. To address the research questions, a letter of request was sent to the municipal directorate informing them of the topic of the research, the objectives of the study, and a copy

of the questionnaire to be administered to the educators. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary. With permission granted by the education directorate, a list of all registered schools and locations engaged in early childhood education were provided to the research team.

The Tamale municipality is a cosmopolitan city and serves as the capital of the northern region of Ghana. Though heterogenous, majority of the population are Dagombas who serve as the indigenes of the city and speak Dagbani as a language. For the purposes of this study, the city was zoned into two with each member of the research team administering questionnaire to each. The questionnaire was successfully administered within a week and retrieved the following week. In some instances, copies of the questionnaire were returned upfront after being filled, and in most cases, they were retrieved the following week. In all, 38 private and public early childhood centres were visited by both researchers. The questionnaire was administered to every educator who volunteered to participate in the study in each of the schools visited.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Gender distribution of the sampled population for this study as presented in Table 1 are; 187 females and 12 males. An affirmation of the gender disparity of the early childhood profession skewed towards females in Ghana as stated by Mulugeta (2012). Also, as shown in Table 1, majority of participants in the study area taught at the public sector (57.8%), an indication of government's lead role in early childhood education provision in Ghana. Again, most participants fell below the age of 40 years; 20-29 years (42.2%), and 30-39 years (34.7%) respectively; clearly a youthful population. In addition, a look at the educational backgrounds of participants also provided in Table 1 shows a whopping 36.2% of participants being Senior High School graduates which means, they are untrained. Though a substantial number of participants possess Diploma (29.6%), and Degree (26.6%) respectively, data on the educational background of participants in this study confirms the position of Asemanyi and Wunku (2007); that most early childhood educators in Ghana are untrained. Other background details of participants such as number of years of teaching are all provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Background characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender:		
Male	12	6.0
Female	187	94.0
School type:		
Private	84	42.2
Public	115	57.8
Age Ranges:		
20-29	84	42.2
30-39	69	34.7
40-49	34	17.0
50-59	12	6.0
Educational Qualification:		
SSCE/WASSE	72	36.2
Certificate	15	7.5
Diploma	59	29.6

Degree	53	26.6
Class taught:		
Crèche	4	2.0
Nursery	10	5.0
K.G. 1	90	45.2
K.G. 2	95	47.7
Years Taught:		
Below 1yr	17	8.5
1-5yrs	106	53.3
6-10yrs	53	26.6
Above 10yrs	23	11.6

Research Question 1 of this study looked at participants' capacity to teach using L1. Results obtained relative to this question are grouped based on the below responses; whether participants speak Dagbani; majority (77.4%) responded in the affirmative, while 22.6% said "No". Still on the question of capacity, when asked if Dagbani is participant's mother tongue, 27.1% said "Yes", and 72.9% constituting the majority answered "No". When asked if participants can read and write Dagbani, 43.7% responded in the positive while 56.3% in the negative. More so in reacting to whether participants were trained to teach using L1, 29.1% said "Yes", and 70.9% answered "No". Finally, still on capacity, participants were asked if they teach using Dagbani; 38.2 % said "Yes" while 61.8% reacted in the negative. This information is found in Table 2.

Table 2: Capacity to teach using L1

Item	Yes		No	
	Frequency	%	frequency	%
Do you speak Dagbani	154	77.4	45	22.6
Is Dagbani your mother tongue	54	27.1	145	72.9
Can you read and write Dagbani	87	43.7	112	56.3
Are you taught how to teach using Dagbani	58	29.1	141	70.9
Do you teach using Dagbani	76	38.2	123	61.8

As seen in Table 2, most of the participants are able to speak Dagbani, though not their mother tongue, and also it is evident that majority of the participants cannot read and write Dagbani. Again, data provided in Table 2 also shows that majority of the participants (70.9%) are not taught how to teach using Dagbani, and most of all 61.8% of the participants in their responses indicated not teaching using Dagbani. Based on the foregoing, it is convenient to conclude that most early childhood educators in the Tamale municipality of Ghana do not have the capacity to teach using L1. Reasons assigned to this conclusion were not sought in this study, though the study findings clearly point to lack of L1 pedagogical training evidenced in the inability of majority of the participants to read and write Dagbani. This conclusion fits the position by Dutcher (2014) that most teachers' inability to teach using L1 is as a result of lack of training and skills in that direction.

In response to Research Question 2 of this study, that is a determination of participants support for L1 pedagogical practices at the early childhood level, the study sought reactions from participants on the following questions; how often participants use L1 for instruction, the subject areas where L1 was mostly used, and how participants perceived L1 use.

On the question of how often Dagbani is used for instruction, responses by participants as revealed in Table 3 are that 26.1% of the participants indicated “Always”, 21.6% responded “Sometimes”, 9.5% answered “Most often”, and 42.7% said “Never”.

Table 3: How often Dagbani is Used

Options	Frequency	%
Always	52	26.1
Sometimes	43	21.6
Most often	19	9.5
Never	85	42.7

Responses by the majority (42.7%) of early childhood educators’ to never using Dagbani to teach confirms results provided to Research Question 1; that majority of the participants in this study lack the capacity to teach using L1 and as result do not use it to teach. In fact, this observation is more revealing in the areas where L1 is used most often as shown in Table 4. Table 4 shows that most early childhood educators use L1 in subjects such as Physical Education (45.7%), and Language and Literacy (36.7%), as opposed to Environmental Studies (1.0%), Creative Arts (1.5%), and Numeracy (15.1%). Though, reasons for such disparity were not provided in the responses, it can be deduced that based on the lack of training on the part of educators in L1 pedagogical use, and with Physical Education being an outdoor program with a lot of activities involved, instruction definitely must be done through the most understood medium of communication (Dagbani). Also, with most participants’ inability to read and write Dagbani, terms and concepts that are peculiar with subjects such as Creative Arts, Numeracy, and Environmental studies could not be substituted in Dagbani.

Table 4: Subject taught using Dagbani

Subject	Frequency	(%)
Language and Literacy	73	36.7
Numeracy	30	15.1
Creative Arts	3	1.5
Environmental Studies	2	1.0
Physical Education	91	45.7

On the question of whether L1 should be used as means of instruction, responses were mixed. The stance of participants’ on L1 use differed between educators at public schools and those from the private sector. There was support by early childhood educators teaching at public schools for L1 pedagogical use as opposed to their counterparts from private schools. Table 5 provides a summary of some of the views shared by participants. These are grouped under public and private school.

Table 5: Educators' Perspectives of L1 Pedagogical Use

Public early childhood educators	Private early childhood educators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dagbani is mostly spoken here. • For better understanding, because Dagbani is taken as a subject at the school. • A good knowledge of their native language will make them speak and understand English well. • Because it is the language which is easily understood. • The children speak Dagbani at home. • They are allowed because they are to learn the L1 before the L2. • Because Dagbani is their mother's language and we can't prevent them from it. • Because Dagbani is their mother language. • Because of the language policy. • It encourages more participation by pupils. • Dagbani is the common language. • Dagbani is the language they understand. • Because the Dagbani give them a better understanding of what is been taught. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want them to learn and speak English very well. • Nothing. • School regulations do not allow. • Because it is not an official learning language. • Because the children speak L1 at home. • The school prohibits that. • No because the school does not allow it. • Because you want the learners to understand and relate to new language [English]. • Because it is a private school, local language is not allowed • It encourages laziness • It brings discrimination • Rules of the school. • It promotes discrimination because not all in the school are Dagombas (Speakers of Dagbani)

Responses by participants relative to the place, role, and institutional policy of public and private early childhood centres show vast difference in the use of Dagbani as a medium of instruction at the early childhood level. While there is support on the part of early childhood educators at public schools in L1 pedagogical use, the opposite is the case with private schools. Indeed, most private early childhood educators (N = 80) as provided in Figure 1 in response to whether Dagbani as a language was spoken at their schools, indicated "No". The reverse as seen in Figure 2 is the case with early childhood educators teaching at public schools (Note: Not all the participants responded to this question).

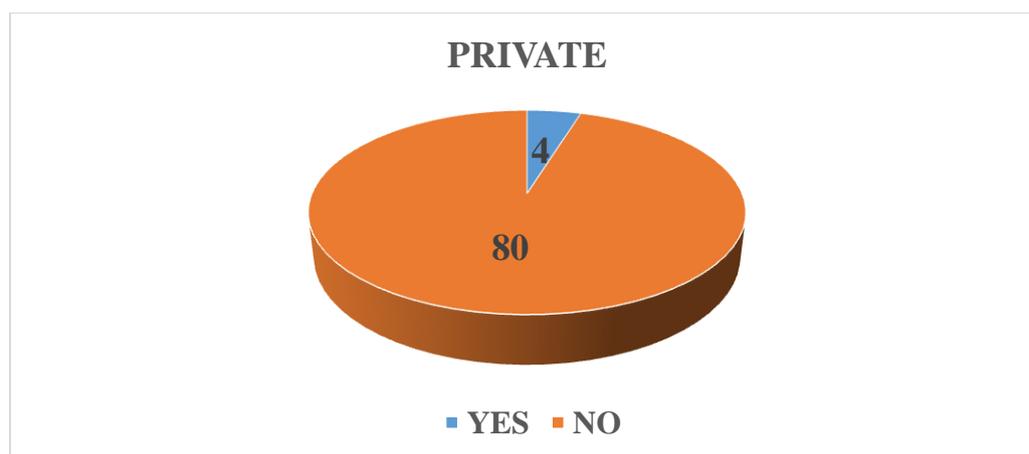


Figure 1: Speaking of Dagbani at Private Schools

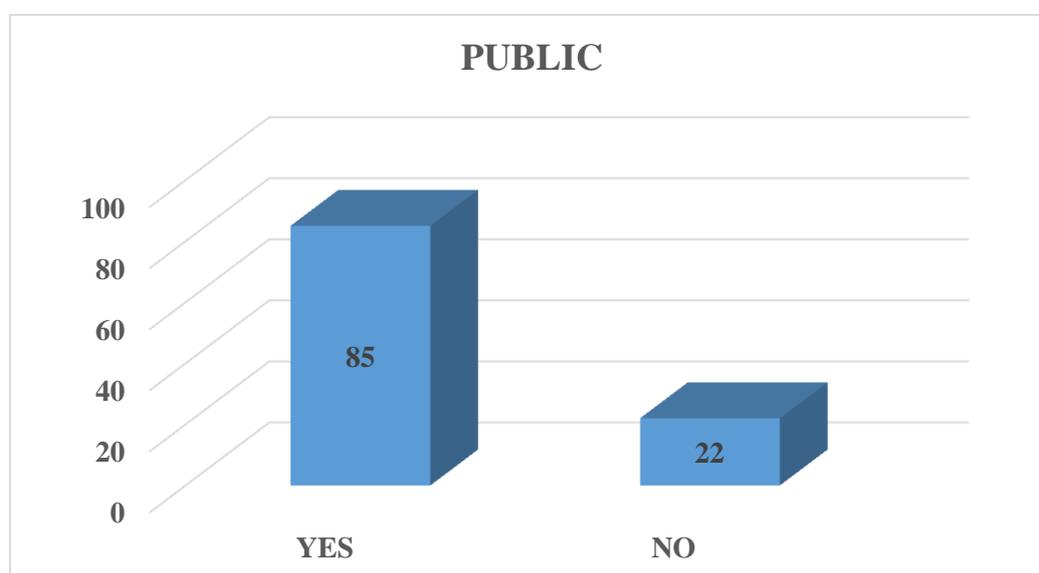


Figure 2: Speaking of Dagbani at Public Schools

Finally, in response to Research Question 3 of this study, that is; participants' perspectives on suggestions regarding improving L1 pedagogical use at the early childhood level, most responses centred on training, making L1 use a national policy, implementation of existing policies on L1 pedagogical use, use of locally made teaching learning materials, parental involvement and education on the benefits of using L1 for beginners, and use of books written in local language. Interestingly, responses on this question came mostly from the participants at public schools which definitely affirm their stance on L1 use for instruction. Responses by educators from private schools were mostly; "I don't Know".

CONCLUSION, SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The place and role of early childhood education in Ghana's total educational agenda is very much stressed. Through a number of policy initiatives and practices, Ghana has demonstrated commitment in making early childhood education an important and critical component of its educational program. This commitment among others is evidenced in making kindergarten education the starting point of formal education in Ghana, and also a part of Ghana's Free

Compulsory Universal Basic Education concept. Ghana do recognize the place and relevance of mother tongue pedagogy in effective and efficient early childhood education and is among such reasons that it adopted the National Literacy Accelerated Program (NALAP).

Interestingly, and quiet unfortunately, the findings of this study clearly point to the fact that regarding the place of L1 as an instructional tool, it is considered the most appropriate means, however, with its implementation most private schools do not adhere to the policy of L1 pedagogical practices in Ghana, which is the use of learner's mother tongue as the starting point of teaching and learning. In fact, most private schools do ban vernacular use in schools and that is the case with some public schools (see; Figure 2). Again, most participants can speak Dagbani but lack the capacity to teach using L1 because they lack training.

Stemming from the above, it is recommended, partly emanating from suggestions provided by participants of this study that the following steps be taken:

- i. L1 pedagogical training should be made part of teacher training curriculum especially for those who will be engaged in early childhood education and teaching at the lower primary level (Class 1 – 3).
- ii. Secondly, there is the need for robust public sensitization exercises especially on the part of parents on the benefits of L1 pedagogical practices for beginners.
- iii. There is also the need for periodic in service training for educators involved in early childhood education in the area of L1 pedagogical use.
- iv. Books for the lower primary levels should be written in local languages, and materials and teaching and learning aids especially at the early childhood level should as much as possible be locally made.
- v. The Ghana Education Service, with the Ministry of Education of Ghana should enforce the existing policy as pertains to L1 pedagogical use.
- vi. Vernacular use in schools especially at the early childhood level should be encouraged.

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