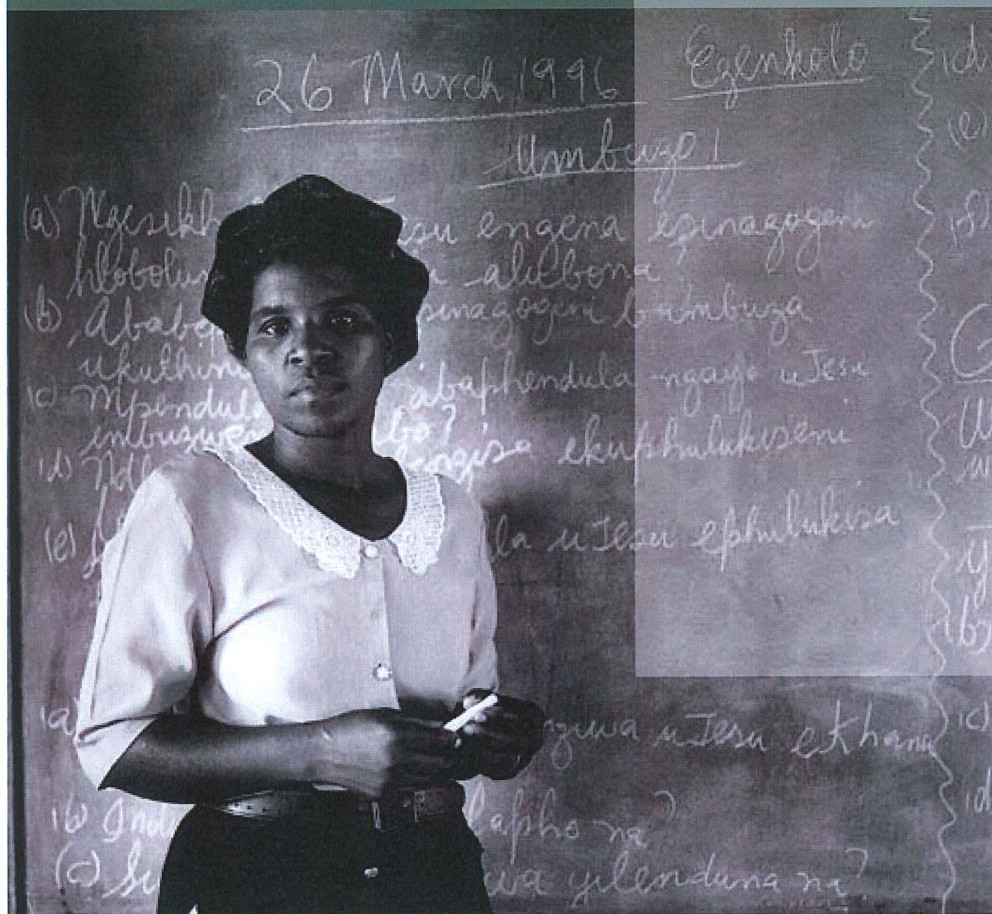


WITHOUT LANGUAGE, everything is nothing in education



The meeting of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) Biennale in Libreville, Gabon in March 2006 will be remembered as the turning point in the use of African and international languages in school education. KATHLEEN HEUGH tells us why.

poor socioeconomic communities where literacy levels are low, require at least six years of quality learning and teaching of a second language before they are ready to use this language as a medium for learning. The African language best known or widely used in the community needs to continue to function as the primary medium of instruction to the end of grade 6 at the same time as the international language is being taught competently as a subject. If all goes well, learners would then be better prepared to begin learning through the international language from the beginning of grade 7.

Detailed research into the achievement of pupils in different language education programmes across sub-Saharan Africa shows findings similar to large-scale longitudinal studies in the USA (see table below, adapted to include the recent findings of research from the ADEA-UIE study).

Under most conditions, only those learners who have at least six years of mother-tongue medium and good second-language instruction will be able to catch up with learners who always learn through an international language like English. Those who switch to

THE ADEA MEETING provided an opportunity for intense debate among the continent's ministers of education, education specialists and development agencies (<http://www.adeanet.org>). Quality, excellence, literacy and early-childhood education were the thematic concerns under scrutiny.

Namibia's Deputy Minister of Education, Dr Becky Ndjoze-Ojo, however, refocused discussion on a deceptively simple message from one of the research reports tabled at the meeting: unless pupils can understand the language of textbooks and the language used by teachers, they learn very little.

There are a number of critical conditions necessary for successful education systems. However, if simple communication between learners and teachers is ineffective, there is little to be gained from spending resources on new curricula, programmes, classrooms,

textbooks or technology.

The Libreville meeting took place 53 years after the *UNESCO Report on the Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*. The 1953 report established mother-tongue education as a necessary foundation for literacy and successful education. This has been interpreted across Africa to mean mother-tongue instruction for two to three years, followed by a transition to an international language (English, French, Spanish or Portuguese) as the medium of education.

The ADEA-UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE) stocktaking report on mother-tongue and bilingual education, tabled in Libreville, however, brought convincing new evidence which demonstrates that two to three years of mother-tongue instruction is not enough.

The majority of school pupils, especially in

the international language earlier than this reach a plateau of language proficiency well below 50% in the international language by grades 5–6 and then increasingly fall behind in all subjects up to the end of secondary school.

English. Most teachers do not know how to help their learners successfully bridge this gap.

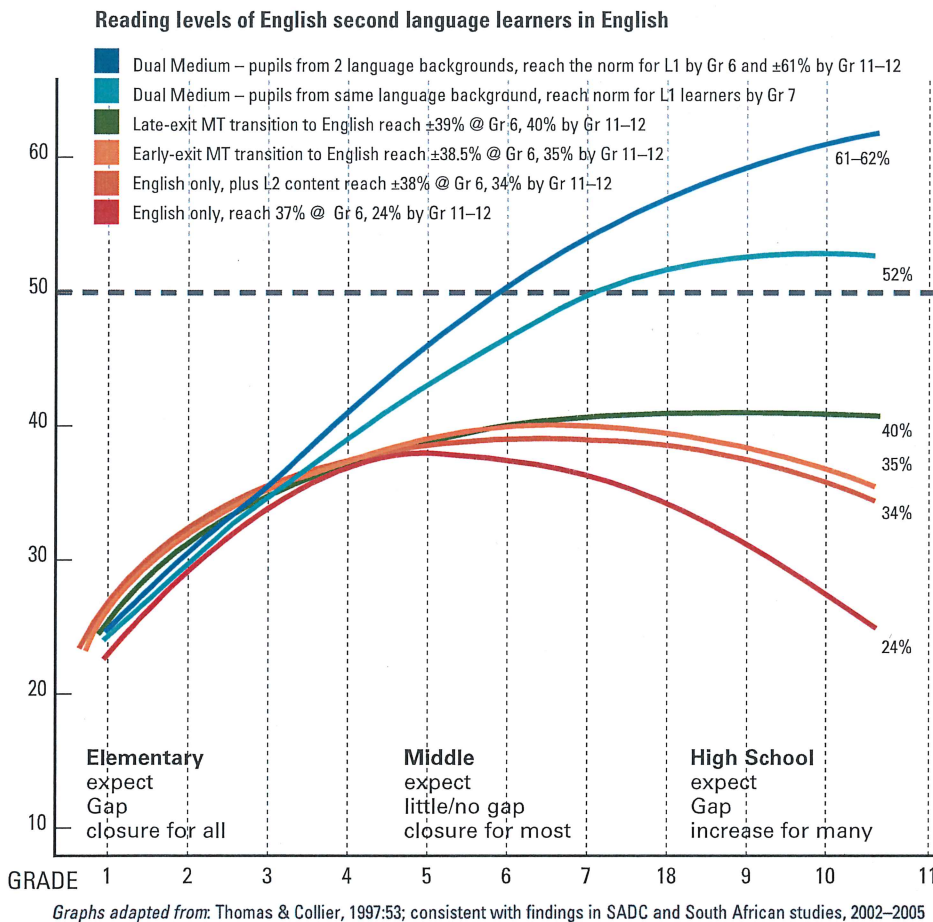
The new evidence was difficult for education ministers, senior officials, and development agencies to accept. Donor agencies,

the longitudinal effects on learners' performance by grades 5–6. Educational impact has to be tracked to grade 6 in order to assess the longevity of the benefit and cost-effectiveness of literacy and language programmes.

Poor results at grade 6, as evidenced in the South African Grade 6 Systemic Evaluation or the second Southern [and Eastern] Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality tell us that further expenditure on existing programmes for learners who have been left behind by grade 6 will render poor returns.

The ADEA-UIE Report will have repercussions across the education system. Most particularly, it makes recommendations for teacher-education provision as well as literacy and language programmes in universities and other institutions of higher education. Most significant of these is the need to ensure that all teachers understand that they should play a significant role in the academic literacy development of their learners. Literacy development extends beyond grade 3 and a subject teacher is not simply a subject specialist. Teachers have to ensure that learners develop academic literacy in that particular subject as well.

Finally, the report addresses the issue of costs. Expenditure on education that fails pupils is wasted. However, the initial investment in African languages and the better-resourced teaching of the international language can be recovered within five to ten years. There is no blueprint for the continent, however, and short-term miracles are unlikely. Each country will have to establish its own timeframes and



The ADEA-UIE report also draws attention to the gap between early school literacy programmes which focus on teaching pupils to read simple narrative stories in grades 1–3, and the academic literacy requirements from grades 4 onwards. This has been referred to as the gap between ‘learning to read’ and ‘reading to learn’. There is a significant cognitive leap for pupils when they are suddenly required to read geographic, historical or scientific texts from grade 4 onwards.

This gap is doubled when learners have to make this cognitive leap at the same time they are expected to switch from mother-tongue to English medium, as in South Africa. Most learners simply fall into the gap between learning in the mother tongue and learning through the second language of education,

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such as the World Bank, which have invested heavily in early mother-tongue programmes followed by a rapid switch to French, English or Portuguese, found the evidence particularly disconcerting. An additional three or more years of African language instruction requires challenging adjustments to programme design and delivery.

An earlier draft report had drawn heated response from the advocates of an early transition to French or English programmes. Evaluations, which have shown positive results of the initial mother-tongue instruction and early transition to English or French in grades 1–3, have usually neglected to show

prioritise a number (not necessarily all) of languages for educational development alongside improving teachers' subject knowledge and educational resources over the next few decades.

As one of the authors of the report, HE Wolff put it so aptly: ‘Language is not everything in education, but without language everything is nothing in education’.

Dr Kathleen Heugh is a chief research specialist in the Education, Science and Skills Development research programme. The full report, Optimizing learning and education in Africa – the language factor: A stock-taking research on mother tongue and bilingual education in sub-Saharan Africa, is available on <http://www.adeanet.org>.

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