



Cultural dance by children at the Royal Mentorship Camp (Ekisaakaate) 2025 held in Luweero from January 4- 18 in 2025. PHOTO /DAN WANDERA.

# Why the mother tongue must begin at home

**Lost roots.** Teaching children their mother tongue is teaching them who they are.

BY MICHAEL AGABA

Samuel Kato is a well-educated Ugandan professional, working as an engineer in Kampala. He studied in the UK where English dominated his academic and social life. When he returned home, he continued using English at work and in most public spaces. But at home, he noticed something troubling: his children, Miriam and Joshua, spoke English almost exclusively, even when addressing their grandparents.

Kato grew up in Mukono, where Luganda was the heartbeat of daily life. He remembered evenings when his father recited proverbs and his mother sang folk songs in Luganda. Those words carried wisdom, humour, and identity. Watching his children struggle to greet their grandmother in Luganda made him realise that if he did not act, his family's linguistic heritage might fade away. He decided to make Luganda a living language in his household.

At first, Miriam and Joshua resisted, slipping back into English whenever they could. But gradually they began to enjoy the challenge. Miriam surprised her grandmother by reciting a Luganda poem at a family gathering, while Joshua proudly sang a folk song at school. Their confidence grew, and soon they were switching between English and Luganda with ease.

Kato's efforts paid off eventually. His

children not only learned to speak Luganda fluently but also developed pride in their heritage. They realised that speaking their mother tongue did not make them less modern or educated—it made them richer in identity. Kato felt fulfilled, knowing he had safeguarded a vital part of his family's culture for the next generation.

United Nations International Mother Language Day, observed every year on February 21, is a global initiative that promotes linguistic diversity, multilingual education, and the preservation of endangered languages. Established by UNESCO in 1999 and later recognised by the UN General Assembly in 2002, the day commemorates the sacrifices made during the Bengali Language Movement in Bangladesh and highlights the importance of mother tongues in fostering cultural identity, inclusion, and sustainable development.

The roots of International Mother Language Day lie in the protests in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where students demanded recognition of Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan. Several demonstrators were killed on February 21, 1952, and this day became a symbol of linguistic rights and cultural identity.

**Global significance of the day**

With more than 8,000 languages spoken globally, many are endangered due to globalisation and cultural assimilation. International Mother Language Day emphasises the need to protect these languages before they disappear.

**Education and learning outcomes:** Research shows that children learn better when taught in their mother tongue. Multilingual education improves comprehension, critical thinking, and engagement.

**Cultural identity:** Language is a carrier of traditions, values, and collective memory. Protecting mother tongues ensures that cultural heritage is preserved for future generations.

**Social inclusion:** Promoting linguistic diversity fosters tolerance, respect, and inclusivity in multicultural societies.

**Role of parents**

Parents like Kato play a crucial role in preserving their children's mother language by creating a supportive environment at home, integrating the language into daily routines, and fostering pride in cultural identity. Encouraging children to speak their mother tongue not only strengthens family bonds but also ensures the survival of cultural heritage across generations. But how can parents do this exactly?

**Use mother tongue at home**

Speak the language consistently during family conversations, meals, and daily routines. Encourage children to respond in the same language, even if they mix words at first.

Robert Kiggala from Acrolet Uganda Limited, a language translation services company in Kampala, advises, "As parents, we should normalise using our mother languages in our homes. It helps children to appreciate them, and who knows, they might even earn from them in future as I am doing right now. When I chose a local language as one of my subject combinations at A-Level, I was mocked by fellow students. But because I am passionate about languages, I have gone on to fully embrace translation as a business and this is doing well."

**Storytelling and reading**

Share folktales, bedtime stories, and cultural narratives in the mother tongue. Provide books, comics, or audio recordings in the language to make learning enjoyable. For Samuel, he decided to tell his children folktales such as *Kintu and Nambi*, weaving in lessons about respect, honesty, and courage.

**Celebrate cultural events**

**QUICK NOTE.**

**Music, songs, and games**

Teach children traditional songs, rhymes, and games in the mother language. Music makes language learning fun and memorable, especially for younger children.

Samuel Kato taught his children traditional songs and explained proverbs such as "*Obulamu bwa muntu bugendera ku bantu*" (A person's life depends on other people), showing how language carries values.

Involve children in festivals, ceremonies, and traditions where the mother tongue is spoken. This helps them see the language as a living part of their identity, not just a subject to study.

Betty Namono Kimbugwe, a human resource manager in Kampala, takes her children annually to the Nabagereka's Ekisaakaate (a cultural boot camp for youth in Buganda). This is annual and happens early January, running for about two weeks. The purpose is to instill cultural values, discipline, and life skills in young people while promoting Buganda traditions.

In her words, "My children have learnt most Kiganda cultural norms (their father is a Muganda) from that camp than they would have learnt from either of us at home."

**Positive reinforcement:** Praise children when they use the mother tongue. Avoid criticism for mistakes, gentle correction and encouragement build confidence.

**Connect with extended family:** Encourage conversations with grandparents and relatives who primarily speak the mother language. This strengthens family ties and provides authentic practice opportunities.

Richard Kyambadde, the county treasurer of Ssingo County in Buganda Kingdom says, "Language is the number one heritage of any society. I teach my children their heritage through our mother language. I labour to enhance their comprehension by conversations with them in Luganda. I put them on calls with their *Ssengas* who are usually Luganda speakers. This gave the children authentic practice."

**Leverage technology:** Use apps, cartoons, or educational programs available in the mother tongue. Digital tools can make learning interactive and appealing for modern children.

**Challenges parents may face**

**Dominance of global languages:** English or other widely spoken languages may overshadow local tongues. In Central Uganda, Luganda may overshadow other languages as children can become adept at speaking it compared to say their mother tongue from another region which may be other than.

**Peer pressure:** Children may prefer speaking the dominant language to fit in socially for fear of being bullied by peers. We know some children who do not even like the sound of their indigenous names they deny them altogether or abbreviate them. Some people mistakenly think that speaking English is a mark of sophistication and education.

**Limited resources:** Some languages lack books, media, or formal teaching materials. According to some websites, Uganda is a multilingual country with an estimated over 70 languages in active use. Specifically, there are 53 languages, with 48 actively spoken, three endangered, and two extinct. The languages include 41 indigenous languages and three non-indigenous languages (English, Swahili, and Nubi). Not all these languages have books, or formal teaching materials.

Bottom-line, parents are a child's first language teachers, and their daily choices determine whether a mother tongue thrives or quietly disappears. By intentionally weaving the language into conversations, stories, songs, and family interactions, parents give children more than vocabulary—they pass on identity, values, and a sense of belonging.

When children grow up able to speak and cherish their mother language, they carry forward family heritage, strengthen intergenerational bonds, and play a vital role in protecting the world's cultural diversity.