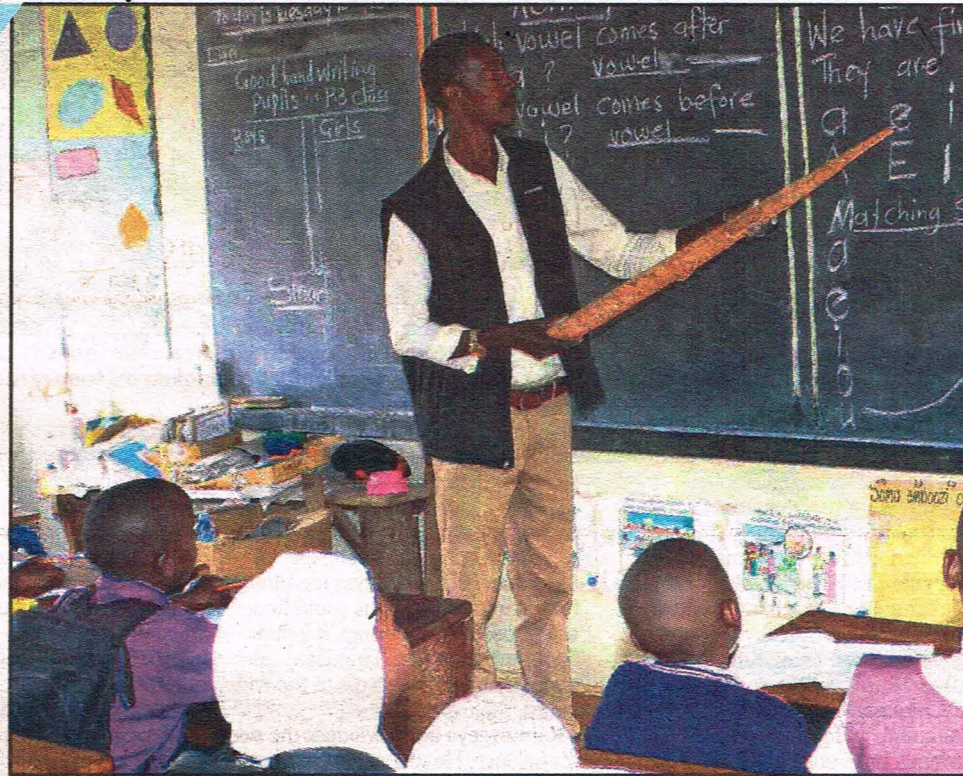


ANNUAL

Is teaching in local languages feasible?



A teacher in the Primary Three class of Kiyunga Islamic Primary School in Mukono district. Learners in Primary One to Four are supposed to be taught in local languages

Thematic curriculum requirement

In 2007, the Ministry of Education and Sports introduced the thematic curriculum for Primary One up to Primary Four. Under the curriculum, learners are supposed to be taught in their mother tongue before switching to English in the subsequent classes, writes

IBRAHIM RUHWEZA

For the last 15 years, Johnson Okware has been teaching lower primary classes in different government schools across Amuria district. He uses Ateso as the language of instruction in line with the thematic curriculum that was introduced in 2007.

He says for all the time he has taught, local parents have never appreciated teaching in the local dialect.

"They are eager to see their children speaking English. They think teaching them in local languages does not add any value to the little ones," he says.

Okware says even when he tries to explain the science behind the decision, the parents never appreciate.

"Teaching in local languages is meant to improve learning and comprehension, but the parents think we are deliberately offering poor quality learning to the learners. Some

even shift the children to private schools where pupils are taught in English," he says.

Jackline Akello Ocowun, the Gulu district inspector of schools, calls for sensitisation of parents about the goal of the thematic curriculum.

"Parents often push teachers to introduce English early. Government should sensitise them to appreciate why children need to begin with familiar languages if they are to succeed in upper classes," she said.

According to education experts, teaching in local languages enables learners to understand concepts better and even when they transition to English, they tend to do better than those who taught in English from day one.

David Kirya, a teacher at Zibondo Primary School in Kaliro district, says ever since he started teaching lower primary classes in the local language, learners have been able to

understand concepts better, although with limitations.

"Some terms, mainly in science, remain hard to translate into local languages. You find teachers left with no option but to retain the original words like sublimation, vulcanicity or metamorphosis," he says.

Winnie Lamunu, a teacher at School Road Nursery and Primary School in Gulu city, shares a similar view.

"It is one of the reasons some private schools stick to the English language as a mode of instruction. The thematic curriculum was rolled out almost two decades ago, but most schools don't teach in Acholi," Lamunu says.

She notes that despite the English preference, the local language remains crucial in learning as a child may once in a while ask for an explanation in a dialect he or she knows well.

According to a study by Literacy and Adult Basic Education, an education consultancy, despite the enactment of policy to make local languages the medium of instruction in Ugandan primary schools, there have been a number of structural and pedagogical challenges to its effective implementation.

"These include a lack of interest from more advantaged sections of society, negative community perceptions about the use of local languages in instruction, a scarcity of instructional materials in local languages, and inadequate teacher

training," the study reads.

A CASE FOR LOCAL LANGUAGES

Juma Bakhit, the secretary for education at the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, is a strong proponent of teaching in local languages due to his experience in Turkey where he went for further studies.

"In Turkey, all subjects are taught in the local language and everything is okay. Mathematics, science, history, among others, are all in Turkish. English is also there, but only as a subject, not as the backbone of instruction," he says.

Bakhit says learning in local dialects makes the process natural.

"It is not just about language, but identity and confidence. In Turkey, students do not struggle to express themselves in a foreign language. They understand and participate in the learning process fully. I had never seen learning feel so natural. Why can't Uganda take the same path?" he says.

The Rev. Prof. Samuel Luboga, the chairperson of the Education Service Commission, supports this view.

"Many learners understand concepts in their mother tongue, but struggle to express themselves in English.

"Punishing students for speaking their own languages is harmful. It affects self-esteem, learning outcomes, and even class participation," he adds.

Prof. Luboga adds that research

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PARENTING WHY SUCCESSFUL PARENTS STRUGGLE WITH CHILDREN

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shows that children who are taught in their first language learn additional languages more effectively.

"Master your mother tongue well, and you will learn English faster and more confidently. Yet our current system often reverses this logic, forcing children to grapple with English before they have mastered the language they understand best," he suggests.

Bakhit says with the competence-based curriculum falling into place, Uganda should think of teaching in local languages.

"English has served administrative and educational purposes, but it should not continue to define who succeeds and who fails in our schools," he explains.

Bakhit says some schools still punish learners for speaking their mother tongue. "This undermines confidence and creativity. Language is not just a tool for learning; it is part of who we are," he says.

LOCAL LANGUAGES

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TEACHERS STRUGGLE TO TEACH IN VERNACULAR

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Currently, there are at least 54 local languages used as language of instruction from Primary One to Primary Three, under the thematic curriculum.

Despite the use, these are not examinable at Primary Seven, and it is a similar structure some have proposed be implemented for Kiswahili.

However, there is also a proposal to reduce on the number of local languages used under the thematic curriculum as a language of instruction. The move would affect about 34 local languages over failure to develop orthography, bilingual dictionaries and genre.

The affected languages do not have course books, the teachers there are not conversant with it and they have hardly revised their content.

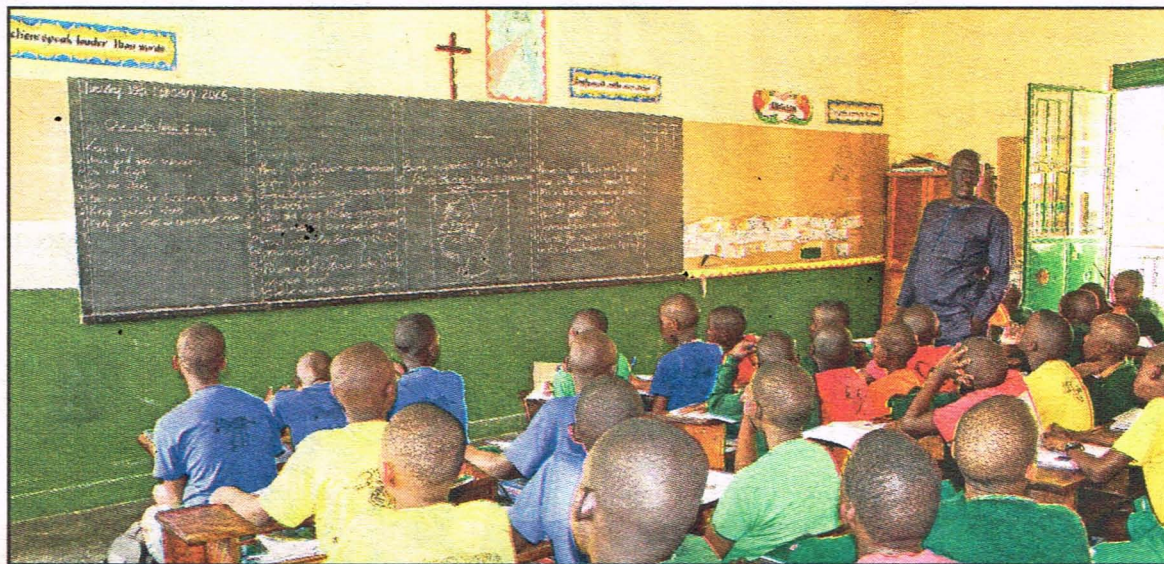
This has affected learning in those areas, making it expensive for the Government to deliver education.

The development is part of the findings by the Government from the recent study on the most feasible languages for instruction, which will be used in the development of curriculum and the language policy for schools in Uganda.

The study is being undertaken by the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) and the education ministry.

Based on the study findings, a total of 22 languages have been identified and recommended as the most feasible languages for use as the medium of instruction in Ugandan schools.

The recommended languages are Luganda for the central region and Kiswahili for the entire country.



Learners of St Peter's Nsambya Primary School in class. Teaching in local languages is difficult in cosmopolitan urban areas because of the diversity in the languages spoken by the learners

On the other hand, in the eastern region, the recommended languages are Lusoga, Lusamia, Lunyole, Lugwere, Lugisu, Dhoadhola, Ateso, Kupsabiny and Kumam.

In the north, the recommended languages are Acholi, Langi, Ngakarimojong, Lugbarati, Kakwa and Alur, while in western Uganda, the languages include Runyankole-Rukiga, Runyoro-Rutoro, Lukhonzu, Lugungu and Rufumbira.

Although 37 local languages currently have orthography, the 22 mentioned above meet at least two requirements needed to be used as a language of instruction in schools.

IN SUPPORT OF ENGLISH

Not everyone agrees that English should be relegated completely. Mohammed Kamulegeya, the

headteacher of Kitebi Secondary School in Kampala, says Uganda is still a developing country and still requires a global language for trade, diplomacy, and higher education.

"English allows us to engage internationally. Removing it entirely from compulsory status could limit our opportunities abroad. It is not about rejecting local languages but about maintaining access to the wider world," he explains.

Kamulegeya acknowledges the need for balance. He notes that children learn best when they understand the language of instruction.

"Over-reliance on English, particularly at early stages, may do more harm than good."

He says English must remain, but it should not dominate to the exclusion of local languages.

Kamulegeya says there is a need to train teachers who can teach in local languages, provide resources for classrooms and enact policies that support children at all stages. He believes change is possible, but it must be carefully managed to protect learning outcomes and global competitiveness.

Ignatius Bagonza, the head of the language department at Katooke Modern Schools, says some schools are plotting to delete local languages from the timetable because they are not ready.

"Even the available teachers are not qualified. They struggle to teach in languages teach in languages such as Rukonjo and Rutooro," he says.

NOT READY

Dr Betty Monge, the former commissioner in the Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC), says Uganda's language-in-education policy is inconsistent.

Monge says English remains the main language of assessment in higher education and global communication.

She says local languages are not yet strong enough to replace English. Monge says Kiswahili, though seen as "an ethnically neutral lingua franca," is still poorly implemented, with limited teaching and resources. She also says schools face a shortage of trained local language instructors.

Monge adds that without strengthening local languages, dropping English could increase inequality, reduce competitiveness, and weaken global engagement. She says Uganda instead needs a

coherent multilingual system that balances cultural preservation, national cohesion and global participation.



Dr Monge