



IMPLEMENTATION OF GHANA'S LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION POLICY IN PUBLIC KINDERGARTENS: THE PERSPECTIVES OF SOME PARENTS IN THE SAGNARIGU MUNICIPALITY, GHANA

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Abstract:

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore parents' perceptions of the current Ghanaian language in education policy and their preference for a language of instruction in KG. A suitable sample size of 96 parents for the exploratory research was obtained through a multistage sampling technique. Participants were interviewed. The data from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic coding. The study found that parents do not deny the importance of Ghanaian languages in education. Still, they fear that its use as the main language of instruction may lead to poor development of literacy skills in English, the official language in Ghana. This shows a mismatch between parents' perceptions and preferences for a language of instruction and the rationale of the current Ghanaian language in education policy. The study recommended that curriculum planners and policymakers should consider re-introducing the English language as the main language of instruction in KG, supported by Ghanaian languages, and re-focus the KG curriculum on the development of foundational English literacy skills as per the rationale of the 2007 educational reforms.

Keywords: language in education, Ghanaian language policy, kindergarten education

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1. Introduction

Available literature suggests that Ghana is a multilingual nation like many African nations with about eighty (80) indigenous languages, and three foreign languages, including English as its official language. Many scholars have argued that using learners' mother tongue in teaching helps them develop social and cognitive skills faster and improves their overall academic performance (Appiah & Ardila, 2021a). However, for several years, Ghana has been faced with a dilemma in the choice of a language of instruction in education: Whether teaching should be done in English or the Ghanaian language and which of the eighty (80) Ghanaian languages should be used in each school and at which grade level?

This dilemma resulted in the formulation of several national language and literacy policies with different directives, the latest of which was introduced in 2009 and became known as the National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP). NALAP was deeply rooted in the 2004 language in education policy and sought to address the observed decline in literacy skills among basic education pupils across the country (Soma & Zuberu, 2022). The policy mandates teachers to use the predominant Ghanaian language (L1) in their locality as the language of instruction from kindergarten to primary three (P.3) and teach the English language (L2) as a subject. At primary four (4) and thereafter, English becomes the language of instruction, and Ghanaian languages (L1) are taught as subjects (USAID, 2020). Out of eighty-three (83) languages in Ghana, the policy focused on only eleven (11) Ghanaian languages known as government-sponsored languages, including Asante-Twi, Akuapem-Twi, Ewe, Fante, Dagaare, Dagbani, Dangbe, Ga, Gonja, Kasem, and Nzema (Opoku-Amankwa *et al.*, 2015). Depending on the region, these languages are expected to be used for teaching and learning in kindergarten one (KG1) to Primary two (P.2) for about eighty percent (80%) of all classroom interactions with English accounting for only 20%, and up to Primary three (P.3) where they are expected to be used for instructional purposes alongside the English language on an equal proportion of 50% (Anyidoho, 2018). Many Ghanaian scholars have expressed diverse opinions about this current language and literacy policy and its implementation, especially at the early grade level, with some calling for its review (Appiah & Ardila, 2021). For instance, the current language policy is said to have shown its limits and stakeholders may need to think about a new policy that meets the literacy demands of the 21st century, preserves Ghanaian cultural heritage, and promotes unity in linguistic diversity (Soma & Zuberu, 2022).

Indeed, existing literature contains more and more views or opinions held by various scholars on Ghana's current language in education policy. Views that support the policy fully or partially are as many as those that condemn it. These are not mere arguments; they are views based on some theoretical underpinnings and denote scholars' understanding of how children learn and develop language and literacy. Little has been said about parents whose children are at the centre of this whole language in education policy discourse. Therefore, this study explores parents' views on the implementation of

Ghana's language in education policy in public kindergarten (KG) in the Sagnarigu Municipal of Northern Ghana.

The study strived to answer the following three research questions:

- 1) What are parents' perceptions about the current language in education policy?
- 2) What is most parents' preferred language of instruction for use in kindergarten?
- 3) What are the implications of this study for language and literacy learning in KG?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brief History of Language in Education Policy in Ghana

After her independence in 1957, Ghana adopted English as its official language and the language of instruction in education. In 1967, this policy was revised back to the pre-independence policy of Ghana languages as a medium of instruction, with some flexibility in urban schools to use English. The 1967 policy lasted till 1971, when it was changed. The 1987 educational reforms made Ghanaian languages core and examinable subjects from primary to secondary education. Similar to the 1971 language policy, the 2001 language in education policy recommended the mandatory study of Ghanaian languages through primary education and directed the use of both Ghanaian and English languages for teaching and learning, notwithstanding that the policy sanctioned the more use of the predominant Ghanaian language in a given area than English for instructional purposes. This language policy was reversed in 2002 when English became the sole language of instruction and Ghanaian languages were studied as subjects from primary to secondary education. In 2004, another language policy was introduced. Teachers were asked to use both Ghanaian and English languages for instruction, with 80% and 20% proportions respectively in terms of instructional time from KG1 to P.2, for an equal proportion of 50% in primary three (P.3). From primary four (P.4), English becomes the sole language of instruction. In line with this language policy, in 2006, the National Literacy Task Force (NLTF) recommended the National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP) to address the declining literacy skills among many school children in Ghanaian public basic schools, as it was revealed in a study conducted for the Ghana Education Service. The programme was implemented in 2009 (Ghana Education Service, 2010, as cited in Anyidoho, 2018). As such, NALAP focused on the use of L1 in early grades while introducing English (L2) as a subject and gradually shifting its focus from L1 as learners move to higher grades. With this policy, schools were provided with important learning resources developed in the eleven (11) government-sponsored Ghanaian languages. Learners receive more instruction in the dominant L1 of their locality and less in L2 to enable them to become fluent readers of L1 and L2 (English) and functionally literate. This is expected to improve learners' abilities and academic performance (Hartwell, 2010, as cited in Abreh & Wilmot, 2018).

2.2 Perceptions of Scholars on Ghana's Language in Education Policy

Teaching children in their own native language is associated with a lot of educational benefits. However, more than 6 decades after gaining her independence from the United Kingdom, Ghana is still troubled by her decision to adopt the English language as her official language, and as the sole language of instruction from primary four (P.4) up to the University. This current language of instruction policy violates Ghanaian children's linguistic human rights because it stops them from using their native languages for learning at primary 3 (P.3) and forces them to use a foreign language (English) at P.4 onward (Owu-Ewie, 2017). Despite the advantages associated with the use of learners' mother tongue in education, the current language in education policy has its own challenges: Out of eighty (80) Ghanaian languages, it focuses on eleven (11) dominant Ghanaian languages used from KG1 to P.3 across the sixteen (16) regions of Ghana. This leads to many Ghanaian languages being overpowered by the 11 government-sponsored languages, increasing the chances of many learners being taught in a Ghanaian language different from their mother tongue. Also, the speakers of the non-sponsored languages may feel marginalised (Soma & Zuberu, 2022; Tollefson, 2013, as cited in Mahama & Bawa, 2022). Also, many have questioned the linguistic and sociolinguistic criteria that informed the choice of some Ghanaian languages over others for use in education and decry the lack of proper consultation in the design and implementation of the current language policy. Sadly, many learners, parents, and even educators do not endorse this policy because, compared to a foreign language like English, Ghanaian languages have fewer educational and socioeconomic prospects in today's world (Anyidoho, 2018). Again, most Ghanaian children experience the English language for the first time in school and struggle to learn it. Given this, some scholars argue that using Ghanaian languages in education may make the study of English more difficult. For them, this is what accounts for the continuous decline in literacy skills development among most children in public basic schools (Dery Man *et al.*, 2019).

2.3 Benefits of Using Learners' Native Language in Education

The introduction of the eleven (11) Ghanaian languages in education is a good thing. It promotes sociocultural awareness and participatory learning and sets the foundation for further literacy development and bilingual education (Soma & Zuberu, 2022). Indeed, effectively using children's indigenous languages (L1) in education can produce proficient bilingual Ghanaians who speak, write, and read both L1 and L2 (Anyidoho, 2018). Also, learners develop literacy skills faster and demonstrate a better understanding of Mathematical concepts when they are taught in their mother tongue (L1). This is because the use of L1 in education overcomes linguistic and sociocultural barriers and comprehension difficulties. It helps learners to easily relate content taught in class to their local settings, which fosters the cultural relevance of some of the educational concepts and leads to lifelong learning (Abreh & Wilmot, 2018). Also, improved mother tongue (L1) literacy skills correlate positively with secondary language (L2) learning, especially vocabulary acquisition, reading, and comprehension. This indicates that using learners'

native language in education provides a strong foundation for secondary language literacy development (Arthur, 2024). This is because learners can transfer their native linguistic knowledge of the L1 to learn the L2 better (Mahama & Bawa, 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1 Approach and Design

This study employed an exploratory research design with a qualitative approach. This design was deemed suitable for this study because it is the kind of research that explores unfamiliar problems or issues where there is little or no knowledge available (Swaraj, 2019). Qualitative studies focus on in-depth exploration. The researcher's purpose in a qualitative study is not to generalise his/her findings to the target population (Padgett, 2013, as cited in Subedi, 2021).

3.2 Sample and Sample Procedure

Scholars have varied opinions about how the number of participants is determined in qualitative research. Many have argued that there is no specific way to determine the sample size in qualitative research. Researchers are usually guided by their experiences in qualitative research, the purpose of the study, and institutional policies on research. However, large sample sizes defeat the purpose of qualitative research (Subedi, 2021). In this study, ninety-six (96) participants were selected using a multistage sampling technique. Available data at the Sagnarigu Municipality Directorate of Education indicates that the Municipality is divided into eleven (11) circuits, namely, Choggu, Gumani-Nyanshegu, Fuo, Kamina A, Kamina B, Kumbungu road, Mile Nine, Nyankpala road, Sagnarigu North, Sagnarigu South, and Tishigu. Each circuit has a minimum of nine (9) and a maximum of fifteen (15) schools. In the first stage of the multiple-stage sampling, the circuits were assigned numbers and registered in a sample frame as the cluster of schools from which the selection began. Out of the eleven (11) circuits, four (4) were randomly selected. This was done using the lottery method. That is, the eleven (11) circuits in the Sagnarigu Municipality were listed on a sheet of paper, and cut-outs containing their names will be made. The cut-outs were mixed thoroughly in a bowl, and one was selected at a time continuously until the required number (4) was obtained.

In the second stage, two (2) schools were randomly selected in each of the four (4) circuits. This was done using the lottery methods as explained in the first stage of this multiple-stage sampling procedure. The schools under each circuit were assigned numbers and registered in a sample frame, and cut-outs containing their names will be made. The cut-outs were mixed thoroughly in a bowl, and one was selected at a time.

In the third and last stage, twelve (12) KG2 children were randomly selected in each of the eight (8) schools using the lottery method. In each school, there were 40 to 50 KG2 children. Thus, twelve (12) cutouts with "Yes" were made and mixed thoroughly in a bowl with many cutouts with "No", all summing up to the number of children in the class. All the children will pick a cutout from the bowl. The lucky ones who picked

"Yes" were involved in the study. The parents of the selected children were contacted and purposively involved in this study willingly.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

Interviews are widely used in qualitative research (Swaraj, 2019). In some semi-structured interview sessions that lasted 15 to 25 minutes, parents were asked to state their opinions on the implementation of the current language in education policy in kindergarten 1 and 2. An interview guide was developed for this study. An interview guide is a document that contains predetermined questions that the researcher intends to ask the interviewee, who gets the freedom to explicitly address those questions to the best of his/her knowledge. Other important topics are discussed alongside the substantial questions as the conversation advances (Taherdoost, 2022).

3.3 Data Analysis

A thematic approach to qualitative data analysis was used. This was done by following the six (6) steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, as cited in Dawadi, 2020). This allowed the study to identify patterns in meaning across the dataset, organise and summarise them in textual and tabulated forms, and align with the research question. That is, (1) transcribing the field notes to familiarise ourselves with the data, (2) generating codes, (3) searching for emerging themes, (4) reviewing the identified themes, (5) defining and naming the themes, and (6) building a coherent report in line with various research questions (Dawadi, 2020).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 What are Parents' Perceptions About the Current Language in Education Policy?

The current Ghanaian language policy recommends the use of two (2) languages at the kindergarten and lower primary level: Use of the predominant Ghanaian language in a given community as the main language of instruction for about 80% of all classroom interactions and English language may be used but for not more than 20% of classroom interactions from kindergarten one (KG1) to Primary two (P.2). At Primary three (P.3) Ghanaian and English languages are used on an equal proportion of 50% (Anyidoho, 2018). Parents of KG learners in some selected schools in the Sagnarigu Municipal were asked about their opinions on the language in education policy currently in use in Ghanaian basic schools. Table 4.1 summarises parents' perceptions of the current national language policy.

The data in Table 4.1 indicate that more than one-fourth of the parents in this study felt that the policy was a step in the right direction because it valorises Ghanaian languages. However, they expressed concern about the excessive use of the Ghanaian language by some teachers in schools.

Table 4.1: Parents' perceptions about the language in education policy

Perceptive ideas	Parents (N = 96)	
	N	%
The policy reduces learners' opportunities to learn English and delays the acquisition of literacy skills.	45	47
The policy valorises Ghanaian languages.	28	29
The policy is turned upside-down and must be re-examined.	23	24

Source: Interview data, 2022.

For instance, a parent observed:

"It is a good thing, but some teachers use the local language too much".

Another parent opined:

"At this level, it is ok to use the children's language, but they should use it fairly together with the English".

Similarly, one of the parents stressed:

"Using the local language is good. It helps the children to understand, but because of that policy, some teachers don't use English again. They speak only Dagbani to the children. That one is not good".

Buttressing this view, another parent said:

"It is ok. When things are explained in Dagbani, the children can understand better, but they should also speak English more. That will help the children to learn English".

Analysing these parents' views, one can argue that a good number of parents in this study recognise the importance of using learners' native language to teach them, as it can enhance their understanding of the content being taught in class. This finding confirms the observations made by Owu-Ewie (2017), Anyidoho (2018), Soma and Zuberu (2022), and earlier studies that the use of the mother tongue in teaching is associated with a lot of educational benefits. The parents' views also suggest that they are concerned about the actual implementation of the policy in some schools and fear that teachers' overreliance on the use of Ghanaian languages in teaching all subjects may affect children's English language literacy development and the learning of other subjects. This finding contradicts the assertion made by Arthur (2024) that effective use of learners' native language in education provides a strong foundation for secondary language literacy development.

Further examination of the Tabulated data above indicates that the majority of the parents in this study held the view that the current language policy reduces learners' opportunity to learn English and delays their acquisition of literacy skills in the language. Also, a significant number of parents held the view that the policy in its current state is the opposite of what it should have been and should be re-examined.

Expressing his views on the issue, one of the parents lamented:

"Why 80% of the Ghanaian language in KG? Why not 20% and more English?".

Another parent cried out:

"Are we training them to speak English or the Ghanaian language? They need to look at it again".

Similar to many parents' views, another parent bemoaned:

"How do you expect them to learn English when they spend more time speaking Dagbani or other Ghanaian languages? Teachers should be asked to speak more English to the children".

Supporting these views, another parent remarked:

"I don't believe that thing; using Dagbani or Ghanaian language to teach other subjects, like English, Maths, and Science? Are they going to write in English or Dagbani? No. Teach them English, use English to teach them; they will understand".

An analysis of these parents' views indicates that the majority of the parents were hostile to the 80% use of the Ghanaian language in education. They felt that the policy should rather be the opposite scenario of 20% Ghanaian and 80% English use in the classroom. Their views show that they want teachers to speak more English than the Ghanaian language in class. This finding confirms the observations made by Appiah and Ardila (2021). They observed that many Ghanaian scholars have expressed diverse opinions about this current language and literacy policy and its implementation, especially at the early grade level, with some calling for its review.

These parents' views also imply that they do not think academic subjects that are examinable in English should be taught in a different language. However, their views do not suggest that they deny the fact that the use of Ghanaian languages can help the teacher to explain certain concepts to learners' understanding in Mathematics, Science, and other subjects. These parents felt that the Ghanaian language should be used as a supporting language in class not as the main language of instruction as directed by current language in education policy in KG up to P.2. These findings partly agree with those uncovered by Abreh and Wilmot (2018) revealing that learners develop literacy

skills faster and demonstrate a better understanding of Mathematical concepts when they are taught in their mother tongue (L1). This is because the use of L1 in education overcomes linguistic and sociocultural barriers and comprehension difficulties. It helps learners to easily relate content taught in class to their local settings, which fosters the cultural relevance of some of the educational concepts and leads to lifelong learning.

Furthermore, the parents' views imply that if the ultimate goal of the education given to the KG and primary children is to help them develop proficient English literacy skills, then they should be given more opportunities to use the English language in school. If not, it will be difficult for them to learn it. This finding is consistent with the revelations made by Dery-Man *et al.* (2019) that most Ghanaian children experience the English language for the first time in school and struggle to learn it. So, using Ghanaian languages in education may make the study of English more difficult and may result in poor English literacy skills development in basic schools.

4.2 What is Most Parents' Preferred Language of Instruction for Use in Kindergarten?

Parents' perceptions about the current language in education policy at the kindergarten are manifest in that they would have preferred more English or the Ghanaian language for one reason or another. Parents were asked how they wished the current language in education policy could be. Table 4.2 shows the summary of parents' preferred language of instruction for use in kindergarten.

Table 4.2: Parents' preferred language of instruction in KG

Language in Education Policy	Parents (N = 96)	
	N	%
Ghanaian language as the main language of instruction (80%) supported by the English language (20%).	0	0
English language as the main language of instruction (80%) supported by the Ghanaian language (20%).	49	51
Ghanaian and English languages as complementary languages of instruction with equal weight of 50%.	15	16
English language as the sole language of instruction (100%) and Ghanaian is taught as a subject.	32	33
Ghanaian language as the sole language of instruction (100%) and English is taught as a subject.	0	0

Source: Interview data, 2022.

Table 4.2 shows that most parents in this study preferred English as the main language of instruction (80%), supported by the Ghanaian language (20%), contrary to the current language in education policy directives of 80% use of the Ghanaian language and 20% use of Ghanaian language from KG1 to P.2.

When they were asked to justify their preference, one of the parents said:

"It is the English we want them to learn, so the teacher needs to speak that more". Another parent stated: "I prefer that because it helps the teacher to engage the children more in English. This way they will become more conversant with the English language".

Similarly, another parent argued:

"More English and less Ghanaian language. This will help them understand the English language faster".

A follow-up question was asked to find out from these parents about what they think should be the role of Ghanaian languages in Education. One of them answered:

"It should be used occasionally for certain explanations".

Another parent had this to say:

"Ghanaian language should be used only when the children start school and later whenever necessary to help them understand certain things".

In the same vein, another parent observed:

"It can be used but not often, to explain things that cannot be explained easily in English".

Also, a considerable number of parents said they preferred the English language as the sole language of instruction, with the Ghanaian languages being taught as subjects. Justifying his preference, a parent indicated:

"If you want to understand English, you must speak English to them, not the local language; they already understand that".

Buttressing that point, another parent stipulated:

"It is better to teach them only in English. They may struggle at the beginning, but with time, they will understand the language. Look at what is happening in the private schools. They teach only in English".

Similarly, one of the parents stressed:

"It is better to start with them when they are small, like this. At this age, they can learn any language provided that you speak the language with them".

Analysing these parents' justifications, one can deduce that most parents preferred their KG children to be engaged in class using mainly the English language because they believe that the more the child is immersed in the language, the more opportunities there are for using it, and the faster they pick it up. For this reason, they want Ghanaian languages to be taught as subjects, and English should be the language of instruction. This finding agrees with Cambourne's concepts of immersion and use or employment, which are among the eight (8) important conditions for learning a language naturally. Learners need time and opportunities to practice their developing abilities in a given language they are interested in learning. They learn more effectively when they are surrounded by speakers of the language or when the language is frequently spoken around them - Immersion (Cambourne, 2002).

Further analysis of the interview data suggests that none of the parents in this study endorsed the current language in education policy implemented at the KG level. This finding confirms the conclusion drawn by Mahama and Bawa (2022) that there is a mismatch between citizens' preferred language of instruction and the current language in education policy.

4.3 What are the Implications of this Study for Language and Literacy Learning in KG

In this study, none of the parents denied the importance of the Ghanaian language in education, but they did not endorse it as the main or sole language of instruction in KG. This finding has serious implications for the relevance of the current language in education policy in basic schools and English literacy development. It points out a mismatch between most parents' preference of a language of instruction and the current language in education policy in Ghana. This implies that the current language policy does not meet most parents' expectations. This suggests that curriculum planners and policymakers need to engage in a broader stakeholders' consultation to come out with a new language in education policy that takes into consideration most parents' expectations and aspirations for their children.

Parents' expectations are deeply rooted in the rationale behind the introduction of the two-year compulsory kindergarten education into the Ghanaian educational system in 2007. This is to give age 4 and 5 children basic literacy and numeracy skills before the official commencement of school at age 6 in primary one. As such, parents expect their children to learn how to perform basic calculations, read, write, and speak the English language, rather than the Ghanaian languages that most of them already speak fluently. Parents are aware that English has been the official language of Ghana since its independence in March 1957 and that mastery of the English language determines one's academic success and, to some extent, one's professional and socioeconomic success. They are also aware that academic subjects in higher grades (upper primary and beyond) are taught and examined in the English language. Given all this, and following certain natural conditions for language learning referred to as immersion and use or employment by Cambourne (2002), parents expect their KG children to be taught in the English language. The use of a language (for instance, English in class) more frequently

or always creates an immersive linguistic environment that develops learners' natural language acquisition skills, namely listening and speaking. This leads to increased opportunities for the use or employment of language by children for varied purposes. The constant use or employment of language results in an improved linguistic ability. This implies that most parents' preference for English as a language of instruction in KG is rational and theoretically grounded.

5. Conclusion

This study was able to sample some parents' perceptions and ideas about the current Ghanaian language in education policy and their preferences for a language of instruction for use in KGs within the Sagnarigu Municipal. The differences in parents' perceptions and preferences of the language of instruction in KG indicate parents' varied aspirations for their children. Parents do not deny the importance of Ghanaian languages in education. They fear that the constant use of Ghanaian languages in class may lead to poor literacy skills in English, which is the official language in Ghana. Their concerns are genuine and theoretically backed. Looking at most children's commendable English literacy abilities in private schools where English is the sole language of instruction, it is not irrational for these parents to advocate for the use of English as the main language of instruction in public KG.

6. Recommendation

Curriculum planners and policymakers should consider re-introducing the English language as the main language of instruction in KG, supported by Ghanaian languages, and re-focus the KG curriculum on the development of foundational English literacy skills as per the rationale of the 2007 educational reforms.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

We declare that we have no competing, personal, professional, or financial interest that might have influenced the conduct of the study.

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