

# Bilingual education: Meeting the challenges of diversity and change in Botswana

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## Abstract

This paper reviews the role of language in addressing issues of instruction and diversity towards the achievement of the aims of basic education in Botswana. It also examines the role of indigenous languages in instruction in promoting and sustaining national educational goals as well as the development of a functional citizen. It further reviews the Botswana language in education policy and its implementation. The failures, inconsistencies between policy and practice, and real obstacles are discussed. The need for compromise in the implementation of mother tongue instruction and its implications for literacy are discussed. Finally, suggestions for implementation of mother tongue instruction and model are outlined to ensure that government responds to the needs of her citizens, in the continuous efforts at mobilizing the people for national unity and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Language, Policy, Mother Tongue, Instruction, Bilingual Education, Sustainable Development.

## 1. Introduction

*Every language contains a universe. Every language provides a unique point of view that is as important to the cosmos of ideas, metaphors, miracles and metaphysics that comprise the totality of human experience, - - -. Thus, the extinction of a language is never merely a blip of local inconvenience in the great rationalizing efficiencies demanded by global economies of scale. Such a loss is always an incremental diminishment of what it means to be human- (Stephen Hume, Vancouver Sun, 2008).*

Botswana attaches much importance to education as well as the medium through which the education is attained. Also, several international organizations such as the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations International Children and Education Fund (UNICEF), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and so on, have proclaimed interest in education. Since 2000, governments all over the world with the assistance of agencies of the United Nations have launched several initiatives/declarations to focus on education. Such declarations include the Education for All (EFA) – 2000-2015, the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) – 2000-2015, the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) – 2003-2012 and the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) – 2005-2014.

The EFA emphasizes the commitment to revitalize education through the provision of Universal Primary Education (UPE). The UNLD was launched to mobilize the resources and political will to promote literacy and meet the learning needs of

illiterate people living around the world. The DESD particularly, called on governments to mobilize efforts for widespread global implementation of education for sustainable development. Both the educational goals of the UNLD and DESD are important to the discussion in this paper. This is because they emphasize literacy as a factor of human rights and sustainable development. Equally, Botswana as a developing Southern African country subscribes to the ideals of these organizations as it believes that, 'the nation's major resource is its people and that investment in their education and training is a necessary condition of national development' (Republic of Botswana, 1993:19).

## **2. Objectives of this Paper**

This paper seeks to:

- Discuss issues of bilingualism in addressing issues of diversity towards the achievement of basic education in Botswana; and
- Suggest a model for improvement towards the realization of the Botswana educational and consequently, the DESD goals.

## **3. Basic Education in Botswana**

Botswana views education of its citizens and access to basic education as a fundamental human right. It also believes that the role of education should be to; develop and maintain a society that among other things promotes moral and social values; respect the cultures and languages of different ethnic groups within the country; promote unity; reject discrimination and uphold social justice (Republic of Botswana, 1993:19). In order to achieve all these lofty goals, various educational and social policies were formulated to address the changing needs of the society since independence in 1966. These included the 1977 National Policy on Education (NPE) (Republic of Botswana, 1977), the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) of 1994 and the goals of Vision 2016.

In the various versions of the educational policies, the State undertook to create educational opportunities for all its citizens and to implement this in the context of bilingualism. In the Botswana context, bilingualism implies the provision of education to the citizenry through the medium of English, the official language, and Setswana, the national language. Considering that language and education go hand in hand, the language in which the education is achieved is a very important factor in the process of literacy. Language and education have strong correlation in terms of the issues of fundamental human rights, liberty, self esteem, societal values, and cultural identity of the individual that are reflected in the Botswana philosophy of basic education which states:

To promote the all-round development of the individual; foster intellectual growth and creativity; enable every citizen to achieve his/her full potential; develop moral, ethical and social values, cultural identity, self-esteem and good citizenship; prepare citizens

to participate actively to further develop our democracy and prepare citizens for life in the 21st Century (Republic of Botswana, 1995:2).

The Botswana, Basic Education Programme was guided by the Revised National Policy on Education (Republic of Botswana, 1994) which calls for the introduction of the Three Year Junior Certificate by 1996. This is an attempt to encourage literacy and access to education by all in order to foster the national and UN literacy and educational goals. The basic education programme includes the first ten years of education from Standards 1 through 7, and 3 years of junior secondary education. This translates to seven years of primary education, and three years of junior secondary education (Republic of Botswana, 1995: 2). The programme is based on the principles of national development, sustained development, rapid economic growth, economic independence, social justice and a desire for continued learning (Republic of Botswana, 1995).

The UN General Assembly at the launch of the Literacy Decade from 2003 to 2012 notes that, if current trends continue, 'Literacy as Freedom' will continue to be an unreachable dream for millions of people, especially in the developing countries of which Botswana is one. It goes further to call for necessary changes in the school system so that everyone has access to literacy in ways that are relevant and meaningful. Furthermore, the DESD urges governments to implement education for all for sustainable development which can only be achieved through the education of all citizens.

Vision 2016 (Republic of Botswana, 1997), the long term vision for Botswana, identifies the goals for the nation by the year 2016. It visualizes Botswana's development with reference to the country's language policy that, Botswana's wealth of different languages and cultural traditions will be recognized, supported and strengthened within the education system and emphasizes that no Botswana (citizen of Botswana) will be disadvantaged in the education system as a result of a mother tongue that differs from the country's two official languages (English and Setswana). All these policies set the stage for the context in which this paper is discussed. The paper seeks to review the role of language in Botswana's education system and how far it has helped to address the issues of diversity, societal and individual educational goals and the promotion of sustainable development in the country.

#### **4. Language Diversity in Botswana**

Botswana, a British protectorate became independent in 1966 and adopted English as the official language, and Setswana as the national language. Setswana is the mother tongue of approximately 80% of Botswana's population, and is spoken as a second language by another 10% (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1997). This situation left very little room for the consideration of the languages of other groups such as Kalanga, Wayeyi, Shiyeyi and so on, in the country. This according to Kamwendo and Mooko (2006) came as no surprise since the intention of the government at the time of independence was to promote the homogeneity of the country and focus on nation

building. In this model, the country sought to develop a monolithic nation with one language, one culture under one flag. It has since been realized, however, that the concept or ideal of development takes into account a commitment to cultural pluralism and cultural diversity.

Although constitutionally Botswana is a multi-ethnic, multicultural society, in practice, it is the opposite. Le Roux (2000) notes that minority cultural expressions are relegated to the private sphere which explains why the languages of other groups are not used in the public domains such as schools. Tabulawa (2008) argues that unless the state abandons monoculturalism, it is difficult to see how any other measures would mitigate the exclusionary effects of the state ideology in education. This can be interpreted to suggest that if a segment of the society feels excluded, exacerbating social inequality with unequal access to education, it will hamper sustainable development.

The view above is tenable because it is proven that the use of the child's first language as medium of instruction at the initial stages of education is beneficial (UN, 1953). However, there is a challenge to multi-lingual and multicultural societies all over the world, and in Botswana in addressing this type of situation. The question of which languages to utilize in education for a relevant and meaningful provision of literacy to her citizens, and uphold each member's human rights and dignity in the process, becomes a dilemma. In order to overcome this hurdle, a lot of policy formulation with regard to language use in education needs to be put into place. The extent to which the ideals of the Botswana language education policy has succeeded in overcoming the problems of the language hurdle needs to be closely examined.

The Botswana Language policy adopts Setswana as a language of instruction for the first four years of primary education, Standards 1-4, after which a switch is made to English from Standards five to seven (5-7) to satisfy the demands of the UN (1953) for mother tongue instruction at the initial stages of education. From Standard 5 onwards, Setswana was taught as a subject (Republic of Botswana, 1977:41). Thereafter, English becomes the medium of instruction and Setswana is taught as a subject at the junior/senior secondary school levels and beyond. Setswana as a subject then becomes compulsory for all Batswana (citizens of Botswana) students.

### **5. Clamour for Language Rights**

Recently, the clamour for language and cultural rights has resulted in the formation of non-governmental organizations such as the Kamanakao Association and the Society for the Promotion of Ikalanga (SPIL) which advocate for the development and preservation of Shiyeyi and Ikalanga languages respectively. These societies have undertaken a wide variety of activities for the promotion of Shiyeyi and Kalanga languages as medium of instruction at the earlier stages of pre- school and primary education, and in adult literacy programmes (Kamwendo and Mooko, 2006). Another

development in the clamour for cultural and language issues was the formation of a coalition that brings together the different cultural organizations named RETENG – literally translated to mean, ‘we are present’. This body is said to be working for the promotion and preservation of the linguistic and cultural diversity of Botswana. It is important to acknowledge at this point the activities of RETENG aimed at the development of writing system of some indigenous languages.

The need to address language and other cultural recognition issues informed the revision of the activities and renaming of the National Setswana Language Council (NSLC) endorsed by the NPE 1977, to promote the use and understanding of the national language (Setswana) to the Botswana Languages Council (Republic of Botswana, 1994). This body is to have a term of reference to formulate a language policy for the country. It is pertinent to note that the council is yet to be formed.

#### **6. Botswana’s Language in Education Policy**

Botswana’s present language policy is based on the transitional bilingual model. This means the use of the child’s first language (L1) as the medium of instruction at the initial stages of education followed by a switch to a second language (L2). Transitional bilingual education offers students some instruction in their native language while simultaneously providing concentrated English language instruction. The L1 in this model is used only as an interim means to master the L2, and as soon as students are considered proficient enough to comprehend and work academically in the L2, then the L2 becomes the medium of instruction in all subjects except Setswana (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1997).

The above sets the stage for the context in which the Botswana language in education system is implemented. It also suggests the bilingual implications of education for all majority and minority groups. The question that arises from this is whether the prevailing system satisfies the needs of all. This is because a part of the NCE 1993 aims for primary education was to improve learning achievement for all groups of the population and remove any barriers to achievement affecting particular groups of the population (Republic of Botswana, 1993:111).

At present there are 26 languages being spoken in Botswana (Nkate, 2005). Out of these, only the majority language, Setswana is used as a medium of instruction at the initial levels (Standards 1-3) of primary education. A switch is made to English as the medium in Standard 4. This implies that Setswana is taught as a subject and at the same time used as the medium of instruction at the lower classes in public or government primary schools. At upper primary levels, Standards Five to Seven, Setswana continues to be taught as a subject, while English becomes the medium of instruction (Republic of Botswana, 1994). However, an amendment to this language clause states that a switch to English can be made as early as Standard 2. It is difficult to assume this as standard practice because the rate of adherence differs from school to school and from rural to urban settings.

### **7. Botswana's Bilingual Education Model**

Nyati-Ramahobo (1997) defines bilingual education as the use of two or more languages as medium of instruction to teach subjects other than language. In some cases, one of the two languages is the child's first language. Also, Matiki (2006:240) notes that, 'transitional bilingual education is an attempt to facilitate learning through the use of two languages. It has already been said that Botswana uses a transitional bilingual model in which the child's L1 is used at the initial stages after which a switch is made to the L2, and thereafter the L2 is used to teach all other subjects and the L1 is taught as a subject.

Furthermore, Hornberger (1990) Ovando and Collier (1985) say that transitional models are characterized by underlying goals of language shift, cultural assimilation, and social incorporation. Nyati-Ramahobo (1997:162) exploits this assertion to conclude that, 'the bilingual education model in operation in Botswana is the transitional model for children from Setswana speaking groups, since they start with their L1, Setswana, as medium of instruction and later switch to English (L1 to L2). For children from minority groups, it is a transitional submersion programme in the sense that their L1 is not used at all and they are submerged into Setswana which is their L2 for the first four years then later switch to English which is their L3. For the purpose of this write-up, Nyati-Ramahobo's description would suffice especially with reference to the children of the other groups, whose L1 is not Setswana. If the aims of the RNPE (1994) is to support equal access to education and remove any barriers to learning, then definitely, the present transitional submersion model for minority groups need to be reviewed and a more inclusive model developed.

In addressing the all important language in education issue, the Minister of Education, Jacob Nkate (2005) reiterates the difficulties in the development of each of the languages in Botswana in terms of orthography, curricula, teaching material and the training of teachers. This concern concurs with that of Nyati-Ramahobo (1997) that for a language to be valuable, it must be income generating and that there must be more to the basis for teaching language than cultural identity. It must in their views, be accompanied by economic value. This trend of discussion hinges on the issue of funding and the position of the government on how much importance it attaches to language development issues.

### **8. Language Value Issues**

Developing indigenous languages is always viewed by many African governments as a waste of resources and in terms of immediate economic gains. Where fundamental human rights and collective well being are prioritized, language can be a resource for economic and sustainable development, promote equal access to basic education and an inclusive and enabling political and social environment. The Botswana government's position on the language of education issue tends to disadvantage a Motswana whose mother tongue differs from the country's national language (Setswana). This may also have a negative implication on the nation's philosophy of basic education that seeks to provide quality basic education to all

citizens as a fundamental human right. It may also not promote the all-round development of the individual in terms of fostering intellectual growth and creativity; cultural identity, self-esteem and so on, if the citizens cannot receive education in their mother tongue.

### 9. Inconsistency of Policy and Practice

In the NCE report (Republic of Botswana, 1993:111), it is stated that in considering a language policy in primary education, the main aim should be to improve learning achievement for all groups in the population equally, and remove any barriers to achievement affecting particular groups of the population (NCE, 1993). Also, Recommendation 18 of the report which was adopted in the RNPE of 1994 states as follows:

- **Setswana** should be taught as a compulsory subject for citizens of Botswana throughout the primary system - - -.
- **Where parents request that other local languages** be taught to their children, the school should make arrangements to teach them as a co-curricular activity.

Certainly, in a situation where the incentive or government backing for the development of other languages is half-hearted and left to poor communities to arrange for their children's language of instruction, not much can be achieved. In the same vein, in a radio broadcast which was reported in the Daily News of Friday, 22 February, 2008 on the commemoration of International Mother Language Day, the Honourable Minister said, 'Languages matter because we use them not only to communicate among ourselves but also to preserve our cultures and identities in all their diversities and richness.' He concludes, 'I encourage all citizens of the world and Botswana in particular to respect and preserve their language because the death of any language signals the death of a culture and identity of its people.' This implies that the action of the government on the issue of language of instruction does not match practice and is full of pronouncements without implementation. To underscore the issue of non implementation of policies by African governments, Alexander (2008) notes that South Africa has arguably the most progressive language policy on paper and concludes that in spite of this, they would have to accept that the language policy is a total failure as they are moving to a situation where the de facto official language is the Queen's English to the exclusion of other indigenous languages.

### 10. Rethinking Language of Instruction Policies and Practices

As earlier indicated, the obstacles to mother tongue development are not restricted to Botswana alone. It is a common complaint by many governments in Africa and other developing countries with multi lingual issues. What is to be done to address this human rights, as well as educational issue in an attempt to promote national

and international ideals, and meet the learning needs of illiterate people in the country?

It is generally agreed that indigenous languages can be used as a medium of instruction, although there are problems of implementation which must be addressed. These problems include the provision of resources by world organizations such as the UN, UNICEF, World Bank and other bodies for governments of multicultural societies to develop indigenous languages for instruction. This is because many governments such as the Botswana government have policies that support the development of indigenous languages but lack the resources to implement it as can be seen from this discussion. For instance, in order to enhance the development of minority languages, the RNPE (1994) recommendation 32 with respect to Junior Certificate Curriculum allows for students to choose the option of a third language in general studies. This is being exploited presently in some junior secondary schools to teach French. Ironically, this exercise is being funded and sustained by the provision of manpower and material resources by the French Embassy and Alliance Francaise in Botswana through the Cooperation Outline Agreement for the teaching of French Language in the country (Mmegi, 2008). I believe that this option can be used to include the development and learning of other minority languages.

Too often, many African governments exhibit lack of commitment towards issues of indigenous languages development and this is why the debate will continue for a long time to come. Always there are ready made excuses – lack of funds, lack of manpower, lack of material resources, promotion of agitations by every single language community, and even lack of workable models in some cases. These reasons, while legitimate in some cases, may lack substance in reality. This is because the investment in language and thereby culture is an investment for both now and the future. After all, Hume (2008) says, ‘to lose one’s language is not necessarily to perish, but if stories are what define us, to have one’s own creation narratives, folk history and traditional world view filtered through the prism of another language must be one of the saddest prospects anyone can face.’ This is a legitimate way to describe the feelings of people whose languages are overlooked or excluded or relegated.

It can be said that the issue of indigenous languages development and promotion goes beyond sentimentalism; it is reflective of the modern day realization of the value of language and the need for its preservation which cannot be quantified in material or monetary terms. In more vivid terms, Hume (2008) claims that Canada committed a great crime of diminishment to individuals and itself when it embarked upon a deliberate attempt at eradicating aboriginal languages. Africa and Botswana can learn a great deal from this tragedy and lamentation.

Botswana has already identified six teachable minority languages that can be used as a starting point to launch the mother tongue instruction programme, since it is agreed that there is a need to pursue the course as enunciated by Vision 2016 (1997) that, no Motswana will be disadvantaged in the education system as a result of a mother tongue that differs from the country’s two official languages (English and Setswana). Also, the attitude of stake holders in the development of indigenous

languages is also crucial. It is important that agreement or consensus is achieved as to which languages are the most viable nationally that would help the greatest number of people to achieve their personal and educational goals. It is easy for monolingual societies to contend with mother tongue instruction, but in societies with numerous languages such as Botswana (26), Nigeria with (over 400), and Malawi (15), it is admittedly herculean, and if care is not taken, African countries including Botswana would squabble over languages for eternity, while global development passes them by. Multilingualism, instead of promoting unity in diversity as an asset, would become a hindrance to development and the achievement of national as well as global sustainable development goals.

### **11. Way Forward**

While Botswana in particular, and Africa in general look inward to solving the problems of the development of minority languages for instruction, and at the same time struggle to fulfill the DESD goals, a model for implementation can be considered. A model of decentralization as expounded by Nyati-Ramahobo (1997:163-164) reproduced below can be considered and modified where need be:

- A. In situations in which the use of Setswana is limited in the home and community (that is in which Setswana is not the language in the air, hence cannot facilitate acquisition), then home language should be used as a medium of instruction for the first four years, with Setswana and English as subjects beginning in grade 2 or 3 depending on their literacy levels in the mother tongue.
- B. In areas in which Setswana is the dominant language amongst a number of minority groups, Setswana should be the medium of instruction throughout the primary education system. English and at least one minority language should be taught as subjects in grade 2 or 3. More importantly, the culture of these groups should form part and parcel of the curriculum to enhance their self-esteem.
- C. In areas in which a minority language is dominant amongst other minority languages (and Setswana could be a minority language in that area), the dominant language should be used as medium of instruction in grades 1-4. English and Setswana should be taught as subjects.
- D. In monolingual Setswana speaking areas, Setswana should be the medium of instruction throughout the primary school system, with one minority language and English as subjects in grade 2 or 3.

It is important to point out that there have been modifications since the development of the above model. For instance the present language policy requires the use of the L1 as medium of instruction in the first three years of initial education as opposed to four in the model. Also, the issues of developing myriads of languages and its

implications on resources have been discussed earlier and arguments made for some forms of compromise, decentralization and identification of language area blocks. While it is important to avoid turning the country into 'a tower of Babel' scenario, there is a need to put into place a comprehensive language in education policy. For ease of implementation and avoidance of ambiguity, the model has been simplified below in line with the RNPE 1994:

Group	Medium	Subject	Component
Exclusive Minority Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>L1 in grades 1-3. Setswana and English from Grade 4 onwards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English and Setswana taught as subjects in Grade 2 and 3.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All cultures with focus on the child's own culture</li> </ul>
Heterogeneous communities with Setswana as the dominant language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Setswana from Grades 1-3. English from Grade 4</li> </ul>	English and minority language taught as subjects in grades 2 and 3	All cultures
Heterogeneous communities with a minority language as the dominant language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dominant language in Grades 1-3 and English from grade 4</li> </ul>	English and Setswana taught as subjects in grades 2 and 3.	All cultures.

Adapted from Nyati-Ramahobo (1997:264).

The above model explains another way of thinking around the development and language of instruction issue. The model acknowledges Setswana as a national language as well as recognizes the importance of the language of other groups to co-exist with the national language and for equity in access to education. Fortunately, the Botswana government is no stranger to the model since it was developed from a study performed in Botswana. It is reproduced here for the purpose of modification or replication by other multilingual societies with a commitment to addressing the language question in their communities.

### **1. Summary and Conclusion**

Kapoli (2001) notes that since 1953 when the UNESCO declared that the mother tongue would be the best medium for educating children, some countries, particularly after gaining their independence educated their children at primary school in the dominant mother tongue. Such countries include Botswana, Malawi, Zimbabwe and others. In other cases political hegemony and power dictated the identification or choice of the indigenous language to be used in instruction such as the use of the Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo as national languages at Nigeria's independence in 1960. With the passing of time, issues of fundamental human rights and social justice surfaced to indicate the inclusion of the multifarious languages in instruction to address the instructional needs of all groups of people and communities. However, this is proving to be a difficult assignment for most governments as a result of the challenges involved in doing so.

This paper has argued for political and social commitment to start the process of implementing bilingual education in Botswana by drawing attention to the challenges involved and calls for the involvement of the international organizations in the process. It stresses the need for change of attitude of the various stake holders in order to address the educational needs of the citizenry. Most importantly, it has highlighted the need to foster social justice and human dignity in an attempt to promote the nation's educational goals, as well as the ideals of the DESD launched from 2003 to 2014. Finally, the paper suggested a model for the implementation of bilingual instruction in the country.

It is concluded that for a multi-lingual society such as Botswana and other African countries, the use of the various languages of the different groups should be considered and prioritized at the initial stages of education. This will in turn, aid the realization of the national, educational and sustainable development goals, as well as the UN DESD goals. The suggested model borrowed from Nyati-Ramohobo (1997) provides a start towards the implementation of instruction in minority languages in the education system.

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