

Linguistic and Cultural Considerations in Mother Tongue Education in Uganda

Professor Okaka Opio Dokotum (Kyambogo University, Uganda)

SUMMARY

I have been in the forefront of the fight for space for languages and culture. There are a lot of issues when it comes to mother tongue education. The government says it has done a lot to help. But when you look at what they have done, it makes you really mad. There are just a few favoured languages.

This is a time of opportunity. The Ugandan government claims it is committed to Universal Primary Education (UPE), yet there are serious loopholes in the government's mother tongue language policy and there is a massive dropout in UPE.

Although the government committed to poverty reduction goals and the need for human development when it began its UPE drive in 1997, out of 2 million who enrolled in primary school level one, only 23% reached primary seven by 2003, many citing lack of interest.

My contention is that lack of interest is directly related to the language factor in that the government favours only five languages. Their language policy seems to view local languages as a curse rather than a blessing.

Uganda is culturally diverse with over 50 languages recognized by the State. And although the government stated that they encourage all languages, the reality is different. When I look at my own tribe, it is larger than some nations at 1.5 million. The tribe is a nation within a nation.

Arbitrary boundaries have been set up and favouritism towards a handful of languages is undermining other groups. The government views these groups as a headache and many are left out of the new world order.

Local language boards have been set up but they are toothless and the government is not effectively funding them. Many of the people who are on these boards are retired teachers who don't have the energy needed for the work. There is a serious shortage of textbooks and publishing challenges and this is undermining mother tongue initiatives. Economic expediency means languages are lumped together in clusters and language material is put together in one language and then distributed among several languages.

There is a need for cultural relevancy and authenticity in textbook production. Students need to go from the known to the unknown, beginning in their mother tongue.

One other problem is the misconception that some languages and dialects are mutually intelligible. For example, many people believe Lango and Acholi are the same language but they are different and reflect different cultures.

We also face problems with orthography development. This is another problem the language boards face. Many languages simply need to be written down and the task of standardisation is daunting.

All this is proving a great threat to education.

The Ministry of Education should pursue a policy of equal opportunity for all because every language is a storehouse of a people's culture. The policy being pursued of survival of the fittest will damage

the self esteem and identity of many Ugandan citizens. The whole policy of mother tongue education needs to be reworked.

DISCUSSION

Question: You personally are one of a 1.5 million tribe. Are you advocating promoting tribalism or nationalism?

Answer: This is a grey area. There is nothing wrong with promoting these languages as long as the nation can accommodate them. I am not saying they should be used to undermine the government.

Question: You say retired teachers don't have the energy, yet they have a lot of experience to offer. Can you explain?

Answer: Maybe I misrepresented that issue. Retired teachers can make a good contribution. But the work of the language boards is hectic and we need some younger people to be active. We acknowledge the efforts of the elders. We have a mix of people on the boards but those running around are the younger people.

There are many problems. As a university teacher and linguist, from my angle, the government is not listening. I wrote a long angry letter to the minister of education with copies to many other officials. No reply. This tells you a lot. This is an arrogant attitude. The minister needs to listen to experts and the community and consider grassroots contribution. When it is top down, the problem is not understood.

The solution is equal opportunity for all. We are all human beings and all languages are important. The problem is not just money. There is money there. It is a question of priority. If there is goodwill, they will promote the languages.

There is a lack of interest and a high drop-out rate. I remember when I went to school, I was taught in my own language. It was so much fun. I was actually caned for reading too fast.

Language is at the centre. This is a serious factor.