Eritrea

The impact of language policy and practice on children’s learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa 2017
2.5 Eritrea

2.5.1 Background information
Eritrea became an independent nation in 1993. Various language policies were implemented in the country between 1941 and 1993. At one point Amharic, the language of the political elite, was made the official language; Tigrinya, the most-spoken language of Eritrea, was banned and Tigrinya books were burned. In 1997, however, when the Eritrean Constitution was created, all languages were guaranteed equal status with no special status for any particular language (Constitution of Eritrea, Chapter 1, Article 415).

Ethnologue lists 15 languages for Eritrea, nine of which are indigenous and currently used.

2.5.2. Current language policy
Eritrean national policy, revised in 2010, stipulates the provision of basic education through the local language. The policy mandates that all nine indigenous languages, with a total of three scripts, are to be used as languages of instruction in the first five years of primary school. The Eritrean language used in a given school is based on the dominant language of the area. As of 2008, seven languages have been introduced in the primary school curriculum: Tigre, Afar, Beja, Bilin, Saho, Kunama and Nera (Sava and Tosco, 2008, p.117). English is the medium of instruction in post-primary education, and Arabic is taught as a subject at both primary and secondary levels.

Use of the mother tongue in the education system has generated heated debate. Many parents, particularly those in the western lowlands communities, express a strong desire for their children to learn through the medium of Arabic, while in urban settings, the demand is strong for English medium instruction. Despite this debate, the Ministry of Education continues to argue for use of the mother tongue in the primary grades. The government’s argument is that basic education in the mother tongue is a fundamental democratic right, and is of vital importance in harnessing the development of the child (Bereketeab, 2010, p.174).

2.5.3. Education policy and practice
Eritrean languages are the media of instruction in early childhood education, primary school, and non-formal learning programmes as described above.

Schools using one of the dominant Eritrean languages, Tigrinya or Arabic, are also operating in various areas. According to the national curriculum, English is taught as a subject starting from second grade and is the language of instruction from the sixth year of primary school onward. (Asfaha, Beckman, Kurvers and Kroon, 2009, pp. 352-3).

A recent review of education in Eritrea (Rena, 2014) noted that the important goals of Eritrea’s educational policy are to “provide basic education in each of Eritrea’s mother tongues as well as to produce a society that is equipped with the necessary skills to function with a culture of self-reliance in the modern economy.” The review further recognizes that the “education infrastructure is currently inadequate to meet these needs” (p. 294). In an effort to address these challenges, the Ministry of Education is implementing strategies such as curriculum adjustment, revision and printing of teaching and learning materials, and in-service teacher training. The Ministry is supported in this work by UNICEF, as well as a grant from the Global Partnership for Education.


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2.5.4. Studies

Two studies on language and reading in Eritrea have elucidated the mother tongue-English dynamic. Asfaha et al. (2009) carried out a quantitative study of the relationship between second language (L2, English) reading proficiency and variables such as first language (L1) reading, L2 language proficiency and L1 script in a multiple language and script. The subjects of the study were speakers of five Eritrean languages, whose primary education was in their mother tongue. The study found that oral proficiency in English and the level of reading comprehension in the mother tongue were the two most significant predictors of English reading comprehension (p. 363).

In 2002, Walter and Davis carried out an extensive national reading survey in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (Walter and Davis, 2005). The survey indicated that children were learning to read under the current mother tongue model, despite some significant limitations in curriculum materials, supplementary reading materials and teacher training (p. 357). Attrition rates in these schools were lower than those in many other sub-Saharan countries. However, the study also found that pupils were not adequately prepared to move successfully from mother tongue medium of instruction to English in Grade 6 (p. 362). The causes for this included poor support for English in the lower grades, and meagre support for English language learning outside the classroom. Asfaha et al. note that this study “prompted a major revision of the education system with new textbooks and a more learner-centred pedagogy at the heart of the changes” (2009, pp. 352-3).
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