

SHARING LESSONS

from the field

Girls'
Education
Challenge



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Language of instruction in the Girls' Education Challenge

When we talk about 'good communication in the classroom' it is likely that we are considering the general rapport between the students and the teacher, pupils' engagement in the lesson and the effective exchange of ideas and concepts. Whilst this is relevant to all GEC classrooms, in many a more fundamental conversation is taking place about whether the teacher and the students are, very literally, 'speaking the same language'.



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The GEC has projects working in 18 countries, within which 126 languages are spoken. These countries have very different linguistic contexts – with official languages and local languages and dialects running side by side in many communities. There are also many different national approaches to language in education. Some favour teaching in mother tongues, some in official languages, and some – indeed most – a mixture of the two.

This has presented challenges for a number of GEC projects, many of which were not anticipated at

the outset of the project. It has created barriers to learning for students, on top of the many expected barriers, such as poverty, access to school and the quality of teaching. As a result, projects have had to look into the issue of language in education, understand its implications for their work and adapt some of their activity accordingly.

This newsletter captures some of the more practical aspects of this learning, which have been drawn from reporting and interviews. What did

the projects encounter in terms of access to mother tongue education and the implications for learning? How did projects respond to the challenges faced by teachers and students in multilingual classrooms? How can this understanding inform the development of future programmes tackling girls' education?

A more detailed GEC research paper on this topic, incorporating the research methodology, a literature review and a fuller set of findings will be available next month.

Context

The emerging consensus is that the more years of education a child receives in their mother tongue, the better their learning outcomes, and the lower their chances of dropping out of school¹. Multilingual education based in a learner's mother tongue is widely considered to be the surest route to improved educational achievement and proficiency in both the mother tongue and the relevant second language. The 2016 GEM report² recommends six years of mother tongue learning – not only as an educational issue but also as a human rights issue, offering a child the opportunity for its language, culture and context to form their foundation for learning. The transition to learning in an official language in higher levels is then often essential, for both examinations and labour market opportunities. Language in education policies vary greatly and have a huge impact on what is expected of teachers and students, curriculum materials and examination languages. They can also be a clear indication of political priorities.

Language in the GEC portfolio

Within the 18 countries in which the GEC operates, 126 mother tongues are spoken. Half that number come from Uganda and Kenya alone. Up to 40% of children are not taught in a language they speak at home and only nine GEC countries have a language policy that advocates teaching in the mother tongue for a minimum of six years. Official languages of instruction are mainly European. And, importantly, there is a lack of teachers with the ability to teach in the most appropriate language – both in mother tongue in the early years and in the official language in higher grades.

Most GEC countries implement some form of mixed language policy – mother tongue based multilingual education (MTBMLE), apart from DRC, Mozambique and Sierra Leone who only use the official national language for instruction.

This mix of approaches and the underrepresentation of mother tongue-based teaching proved to be a significant, and sometimes unanticipated, barrier to learning for a number of GEC projects. Even when teachers are fluent in the relevant languages, training on how to transition between the two and effective techniques for managing



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different languages in the classroom, is often absent. Learning was made significantly harder for some children who had no previous experience of speaking, reading or writing in the official language. Testing in the official language often was not fully reflective of a child's knowledge and skills if they had been taught in the mother tongue.

Some projects had already built a consideration of these issues into their programming and were engaged in producing resources in the appropriate language and supporting teachers and pupils but others had not factored this into their project plans and had to adapt their work to address these challenges.

This is not an easy task. Although project implementers may believe that an increase in mother tongue teaching will help to improve teaching and learning, they have to work within the existing system. Influencing policy which is often politically driven and tackling issues such as national teacher deployment is very challenging. It is helpful to understand what the 'ideal' language policy might be but it may not be realistic to focus on this as a solution.

“On one hand, it could be argued that the ideal solution to this barrier [i.e. learning in English] would be to teach students in their native language. However, this solution is generally not realistic, given the effort, expense and expertise required to design and produce instructional materials in multiple languages.”

Plan International (Sierra Leone), Endline Report

As the GEC moves into its next phase this issue will become an increasing focus. The lessons that have been drawn from the work to date on this topic should inform the programming for this phase. In particular, many of the girls supported by GEC projects will be at the point of transition from mother tongue teaching to official language and testing. Some of the recommendations from the cross-portfolio analysis are included at the end of this paper:

¹ Chumbow, 2013; Brock-Utne, 2007; Tickly, 2016; Pinnock, 2009

² Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016, UNESCO: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002457/245752e.pdf>

Results from the GEC: The 'quant'

Three major lessons were drawn from learning tests and household surveys, which we believe are consistent with existing data.

1. Teaching in the mother tongue has an effect on girls' abilities to learn before any other educational interventions begin.

At baseline, statistically significant differences in learning levels were found between those girls who learned in the language they spoke at home and those who did not: with those learning in the same language scoring significantly higher. Practically, this suggests that anyone planning educational interventions in linguistically diverse regions should be aware of the differences in learning ability that are latent in the classroom due to language. Overcoming these barriers may require solutions around linguistic catch up classes, or flexibility of teachers' use of language.

2. Educational interventions conducted in mother tongue appear to have a significantly greater impact on improving girls' learning than those that do not.

GEC analysis shows that interventions which were sensitive to language of instruction were able to improve their girls' literacy by on average 9.4 words per minute more than a non-language sensitive intervention. The policy implication is that educational interventions should consider language in their activities if they wish to have the greatest chances of improving educational outcomes. Teacher training courses and additional classroom resources would be more effective for example if there is an effort to make sure that teachers who speak the local languages are placed in appropriate schools.

3. Teaching in the local language is more important in the formative younger grades than in older grades, however lagged effects of early instruction may exist.

What the results show is that, for older grades of girls, the importance of learning in one's language diminishes. This is a statistically significant relationship that stands for both literacy and numeracy when we use our standardised learning scores. This may be because older grades of girls have been exposed to official languages of

instruction for longer, and so may be more fluent in the language than younger girls. It may also be a factor of attrition, as those who remain in school may be more advanced in the language of instruction than those who drop out. Despite the limitations of the data, the GEC data does show a declining importance of language of instruction for older grades. This insight underlines the significance of language for younger grades. This is the key insight for designing educational interventions: that at the early stages of intellectual development, language is a highly important factor in determining educational outcomes.

Testing

Where the language of instruction is different from the mother tongue or where multiple languages are used in education, the choice of language for learning tests is not always straightforward. There are implications whichever decision is made. The majority of GEC countries use national language for testing and this was adopted by projects. However, there is clearly a risk that this could mask a child's true knowledge and abilities if their fluency, particularly written fluency, in this language is low.

One solution is to test all girls in both languages. Three projects (Health Poverty Action, Varkey Foundation and Ericsson) elected to do this.



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Case studies: Health Poverty Action (Rwanda), Varkey Foundation (Ghana) and Ericsson (Burma)

In Health Poverty Action's case, testing in two languages was undertaken due to the presence of Kinyarwanda as the LOI in lower grades and the relatively weak English skills among teachers. In Ericsson's case, it was not related to mother tongue considerations, but was to allow the project to test beneficiaries' progress in English, taught as a subject in Myanmar.

Adding an additional test to the evaluation can increase the burden on tested girls, as well as increasing the time and resources required. However, it has significant advantages in allowing a fuller assessment of literacy and numeracy skills, as well as a greater understanding of the effects of language on learning. In Health Poverty Action's case, the very apparent differences between learning outcomes in English and Kinyarwanda, where learning outcomes for English were lower and the number of non-readers higher, has enabled the project to tailor their future work to improve the English skills of both teachers and students.

Health Poverty Action's positive experience with testing in two languages may only have been possible because Kinyarwanda is well-established both as an LOI in lower primary, and as a written language. For the Ghana-based Varkey Foundation project, which tested pupils in both English and local languages, pupils actually performed slightly better in English at the project baseline. A project representative gave the view that this was due to the primarily oral and informal use of these languages: 'mostly people's skill in local language is just in spoken skill, in oral, so in terms of writing and ability to really express yourself or be able to write it – it's not too strong in most areas.'

Learning from the GEC: Project-related lessons

Over the course of the GEC, projects have faced a number of language-related challenges. These have been at system, school, contextual and individual levels. Some of these challenges, and project responses to them, are outlined below. This section focuses in particular on the issues where projects were able to make practical adaptations to their work. A fuller analysis of broader issues related to LOI can be found in the longer research paper.

Marginalised girls – language as an extra barrier

In many cases, for girls who are already facing certain forms of marginalisation, language can form an additional barrier which contributes to their status as harder to reach and more at risk of dropout. As an example, for projects that work with refugees, the transient population and presence of speakers of many different languages complicate the challenge of finding an appropriate language of instruction. For out of school girls, an unfamiliar language of instruction can present a barrier to returning to school. Additionally, many disabled children may have never been in mainstream education and may not have been exposed to a language other than the mother tongue spoken at home.

“The way in which linguistic transition points are built into multilingual education systems can have a profound impact on learners.”

Transition

The way in which linguistic transition points are built into multilingual education systems can have a profound impact on learners. This includes not only the age of exit from mother tongue education, but also the way in which teachers and learners are supported to cope with the shift from one LOI to another. Early & Norton (2014) have commented on the concerns raised by Ugandan teachers about the ‘sudden jump’ from mother tongue to English; this concern was echoed widely by GEC projects.

Case study: WUSC (Kenya)

The WUSC GEC project operates in Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps. The transient population and presence of speakers of many different languages further complicates the challenge of finding an appropriate LOI. The likelihood of the LOI used in practice aligning with national policy is even more remote.

One of WUSC's primary interventions focusing on refugee girls was tutorials. By their nature, tutorial sessions target many of the language challenges faced by students and teachers, such as a lack of educational materials, large class sizes, and teacher language capacities.

A WUSC representative explained that remedial classes had proved valuable not only due to the individualised attention they provide, but because ‘our remedial teachers are drawn from the local community and are able to speak local language to the girls’, allowing them to relay concepts in the students’ own languages, and explain the content of their textbooks (which are primarily in Swahili or English).

Case study: CARE International (Somalia and Somaliland)

CARE International's GEC project is based in Somalia and Somaliland, where most primary education (Grades 1-8) is conducted in Somali, the mother tongue of the majority of beneficiaries. English becomes the language of instruction at secondary level. At endline, CARE reported that roughly 75% of caregivers said that the girls could not speak English at all.

In an interview, one project member stated that ‘when we look at the pattern in the acquisition of reading skills in primary schools in Somalia, we see a curve that moves upwards faster than in other countries’, mentioning ‘atypical’ gains in reading comprehension across grades. This was seen as explicitly linked to the use of the mother tongue in schools, as well as early exposure to reading through widespread religious education prior to joining primary school. CARE is involved in another GEC project in Afghanistan where a clear disparity in reading gains was observed between children who speak the language of instruction and those who do not. Somali primary students were described as ‘racing ahead’ in terms of reading comprehension, even though they could be considered ‘more marginalised in terms of huge drought and exposure to violence.’

However, these improvements at the primary level stop abruptly once English becomes the LOI at the beginning of secondary school. The same project member pointed to baseline evaluation results (before the start of project implementation) which show that at the secondary level ‘there was literally no difference in learning outcomes between grades’ – learning levels were identical from Form 1 to Form 4. This suggested that ‘girls [were] not learning anything from one grade to another’. A similar trend could be observed in maths, taught through English at secondary school. This dramatic disparity between learning at primary and secondary level suggests that an approach which does not focus sufficiently on the second language may enable children to consolidate skills in their mother tongue, but it may also put them at a disadvantage when moving to the official language of instruction later on.

Response: As a result, CARE intends to provide English as a Second Language support to girls starting from late primary school ‘to smooth the transition to secondary’. Digital learning content, accessible via mobile phones and tablets, will be provided to students between (primary) Grade 5 and (secondary) Form 4 to increase learners’ contact time with English as they move from mother tongue to English Medium Instruction.

Changes in language and policy

In recent years, reforms to the language policies across the developing world have increased the number of children worldwide who experience at least some education in their mother tongue. Despite the many positive changes brought about by these reforms, in the short term they can cause considerable disruption, especially when executed abruptly.

Case study: Health Poverty Action (Rwanda)

Health Poverty Action operate in Rwanda where, in 2008, the government moved to English as the sole LOI after Primary 4. This was a challenge for the project, as many teachers and older students lack fluency in English. Health Poverty Action's midline evaluation results demonstrated that upper grade girls were still having difficulties with basic English skills.

Towards the end of the programme, another potential change to Rwanda's language policy was announced, meaning that schools could be moving to a dual-language model, with Kinyarwanda as the LOI throughout primary school and, possibly, English and French as LOI at secondary level.

Response: Health Poverty Action is now working with other stakeholders to provide feedback, being sought by the government, to help ensure that these policies are suitable and that any changes do not affect learning. Communities of practice are emerging within the education and development sector, with forums being created to facilitate lesson learning and sharing.



Teachers' language ability and training

A number of GEC projects found that teachers were not properly prepared and supported to deliver education in the language of instruction – with severe consequences for learners. While the majority of projects reported that teachers were drawn from local communities, in some cases teachers who were assigned centrally to project areas were not able to communicate with students in their own language. Even when teachers are able to communicate in all relevant languages, they may still lack the ability to support children as they move from one LOI to another. Similarly, teachers may not have the necessary training to cope with classrooms where learners have multiple first languages.

Link Community Development operate in a region of Ethiopia where English is the LOI from Primary 5 onwards, and is taught as a subject from Primary 1. This project administered an English test to teachers in project schools, and found that only 4.9% of those sampled were able to pass to an adequate standard, with 72.5% failing outright.⁴

Project responses

Ericsson, operating in Myanmar, used digital content provided via tablets to counteract poor English skills on the part of teachers. One student is quoted as saying 'if we do not know the pronunciation of a word

before, we can learn it through the voices from the tablets. We can learn about things related to English more and more.' More commonly, projects focused on working directly with teachers. Projects, such as those implemented by Theatre for a Change, Red Een Kind and International Rescue Committee (IRC), have provided training which aims to improve teachers' own capacity in the LOI.

Lack of materials

GEC projects found that the already serious problem of insufficient or low quality education materials that exists in many contexts is compounded when it comes to minority languages. This is particularly common in contexts where predominantly oral languages with no writing system are spoken. For IRC, working in DRC, many of the languages encountered within the project's beneficiary population are either completely oral, or have only recently gained an orthography.

Where there has been a direct attempt to address issues stemming from language of instruction, this has often been restricted to educational materials.

³ Samuelson & Freedman, 2010

⁴ 'Improving Reading Instruction in the Classrooms of Rural Ethiopia', Laura Garforth, 2016

Project responses

The example that most clearly addresses the challenges of learning in a language other than one's own is Camfed International Tanzania's study guide for children in lower secondary, *How to Learn in English*. This resource is unique in that it specifically addresses not just English language ability, but the approach to learning. It was developed at the outset of the GEC to ease the transition from Swahili to English-medium instruction in secondary school for beneficiaries. In their midline report, this project demonstrated that 97% of beneficiaries reported finding English language training materials provided by the project helpful in passing national exams.

Other projects have worked with local educational authorities to produce learning materials in local languages. One example is Save the Children Ethiopia, who have designed an Afari reading primer and accompanying teacher guide to address a current lack of Afari educational materials. They have also worked with the local government to translate the Primary 1 & 2 curriculum into Afari.

Community attitudes

Most GEC projects found that within local communities the acquisition of national or international languages is a highly valued skill. Members of numerous projects reported enthusiasm among parents for their children to learn a language such as English, French or Portuguese. Indeed, acquiring an international language is often considered by parents to be one

of the main purposes of education, to the extent that teachers have received pushback from community members for any use of local languages, even in early grades. The reasons behind this emphasis on international languages are generally based on the value of these languages in the labour market, and their association with higher social status. In the majority of GEC countries, proficiency in the official language is a requirement for academic qualifications and most formal jobs meaning that community members are understandably reluctant to limit children's life chances by deprioritising fluency in official languages in favour of local languages. However, as outlined above, evidence suggests that this belief that the mother tongue must be overlooked to build other language skills is mistaken, and that in fact, proficiency in mother tongue literacy is likely to be the most effective route to proficiency in literacy skills in additional languages.

“Learning Somali and English may serve different purposes, with Somali instruction seen as a way of connecting more deeply to Somali culture, and English instruction as a way of connecting with the world.”

Project responses:

This is not to say that communities only value international languages. Particularly in areas affected by ethnic conflicts, the demand for linguistic rights can be a live issue for project communities. Somali

projects provide an illustration of the strong links between language and identity. Members of one Somali project spoke of a 'cultural attachment to the Somali language', and mentioned that while civil war has fragmented the country into different federal states, one of the few constants they hold in common is the use of Somali as a language of instruction at the primary level. Another Somali project quoted a community member as saying: "If we learned in our language and use our currency, we are close than others like family". The report also suggested that 'learning Somali and English may serve different purposes, with Somali instruction seen as a way of connecting more deeply to Somali culture, and English instruction as a way of connecting with the world'.

Project responses

One project, working in Somalia, introduced an innovative language arts programme used by project Girls' Clubs. The programme draws on the 'strong oral culture' of Somalia, using storytelling and poetry to 'create messages conveying the importance of girls' education'. The girls write, produce and film short videos illustrating 'the importance of girls going to school and the challenges they face in doing so', intended for use 'as motivational pieces for sharing with peers and as advocacy tools for sharing with the community education committees and the Ministry of Education'. The project has found this to be an effective and empowering approach, building the girls' confidence and creativity, and generating 'enthusiastic engagement' on the subject of girls' education.



Recommendations

Based on these experiences, we have developed some suggested recommendations that could help to tackle the specific challenges encountered by GEC projects. As evident even within the GEC portfolio, linguistic contexts vary widely and these approaches may not fit all contexts. However, some GEC projects and other practitioners who recognise their experiences in the material presented above may find it useful to consider some of the following in future programming:

Consider language from the outset.

The lessons drawn here suggest that the impact of language on learning is significant. However, many projects did not take this barrier into account until midline evaluation findings brought it to their attention. The next phase of the GEC presents an opportunity to ensure that language is incorporated throughout interventions, especially as in many countries the transition to upper primary or secondary school is also a linguistic transition point. Assumptions about language, particularly for projects which are working at new grade levels, should be challenged.

Engage actively with the language policy.

Practitioners should actively seek to promote and make use of language policies where they exist. They should promote the value of local languages, seeking to create buy-in for mother tongue based education among communities, as well as school and local leadership. Language choice should be carefully considered in relation to all project activities including those outside the classroom to make projects more accessible to children and families. At the regional or national level, practitioners should get involved in advocacy wherever possible to influence future decisions around language in education policy, drawing on rich experiences such as those illustrated in this paper.

Promote language supportive pedagogy.

Practitioners should be sure that they themselves are familiar with best practice in regards to language – for example, encouraging teachers to make use of helpful practices such as appropriate use of



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code switching (the use of two or more languages in the same sentence or conversation) and challenging the view that teachers who use their own languages are lazy. Projects should have a clear idea of what excellent, language supportive education would look like, so that they can aim towards this wherever possible. Punishment for speaking in one's own language must be vigilantly rejected, as the damage to self-esteem and self-confidence is not only a serious problem in itself, but it also prevents students from developing language skills as they may be afraid of failing.

Gather and analyse appropriate data relating to language.

Analysis of GEC project data revealed that many projects are not systematically collecting information about language. In order to develop an evidence base and form a solid basis for advocacy, practitioners should ensure that relevant information is collected and used. Classroom observations or other methods should be used to survey the linguistic composition of the beneficiary population, often more complex than initially believed. It is of critical importance that children's own views are sought as part of data collection. Where minority language speakers and refugees are found to be present, it would be advisable to adapt to account for their linguistic needs.

Ensure that learning is tested in an appropriate language.

Wherever possible, testing should be conducted in the official curriculum language, especially where this is mother tongue in early years, to consolidate the incentive to promote proficiency in this language. In some cases it will be relevant to test in two languages - more than is currently being done.

Recognise language as a key part of teaching quality.

Given the vital role of teacher capacity in providing access to linguistically appropriate education, practitioners should be encouraged to make teachers' language abilities a central part of the focus on teaching quality. This should include collecting information on their language abilities and practices, whether through classroom observations, training events, or other means.

Share experiences.

Many projects expressed the desire for more collaboration in this area, as well as curiosity about other projects' experiences. The evidence base for practical approaches to teaching and learning in multi-lingual education settings is still developing, so practitioners should take opportunities where available to compare their experiences with other practitioners. The GEC Fund Manager will facilitate these discussions and opportunities in the next phase.

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