

Review

Technical-vocational education and language policy in Ghana

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Technical and vocational graduates in Ghana are often ill-equipped to become self-reliant or well-fitted into the demands of the job market. This pattern can be examined in terms of the educational language policy implementation that disregards regional linguistic needs. This seems to arise as a result of the medium of instruction that is implemented in wholesale. This paper illustrates the need for the adoption of predominant regional Ghanaian languages to be used as medium of instruction in our various technical and vocational institutions in Ghana to enable learners grasp the desired skills and concepts that are relevant to preparing graduates of technical and vocational institutions for the job market. Such changes would better facilitate the technological and national advancement that we need.

Key words: Language policy, medium of instruction, technical and vocational education and training, desirable skills, workforce development, economic development.

INTRODUCTION

Technical and vocational education throughout the world has one main aim: producing graduates who would have opportunities of securing jobs that are well-paid and or creating employment for themselves by using their acquired skills. This goes a long way in reducing the teeming unemployed youths in the world over. Lewin (1997) listed five reasons why governments the world over should invest in vocational and technical education. One outstanding reason amongst them is equipping individuals with skills and knowledge necessary for making individuals productive members of the society. Unfortunately, this aim of reducing unemployment through technical and vocational education seems to have eluded many a nation. The employable skills that should have been acquired during the training seem to be either inadequate or a mismatch within the job market.

Where could be the concentration; skills acquisition or a struggle to grasp concepts in a language not suitable for the teaching and learning of the skills?

Where technical and vocational graduates are given the opportunity, remuneration is a problem as Apraku (2011:2) quotes Professor James Flolu, former Principal of College of Technology, Kumasi as follows:

...technical graduates in Ghana are frustrated by employers placing them wrongly with inappropriate salary and job levels. Some employers discriminate against technical and vocational graduates, whilst some educational institutions didnot accept qualification from graduates of technical and vocational institutions. As a result of erroneous perception bythe public concerning technical graduates, everybody wants to go to "secondary"

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school and to the university yet we want to enjoy electricity, we want water to flow through our taps, we want our telephones to work constantly, we want quality internet services, the question is where will the technicians who are in the majority in the industries, come from to provide these services. Without technicians and vocational skills workers, the nation's development would come to a standstill. "The Currency for innovation in the economy is Technology as they say"

Following the above it is without doubt that technical and vocational education is a backbone of every nation; for, creativity, invention and manufacturing emanate from this type of education. Due to the importance of technical and vocational education, polytechnics are established in each region of Ghana to offer continuing education to people who opt for technical and vocational education at the second cycle level.

Graduates who come out of these technical and vocational institutions are supposed or presumed to be self-reliant. The concept of the new educational system by the erstwhile Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) provided the necessary tools in 1987 for the junior high school learners to be exposed to the practical aspect early in life. It was a brilliant idea that lasted for only a short time. The equipment and tools are difficult to trace now.

The aim was to equip individuals with employable skills so that they can establish their own businesses and if possible, employ others immediately after that level. However, it is the opposite in Ghana; for, there is a teeming unemployed youths roaming. The few who are fortunate to be absorbed into the industries seem to perform below expectation. Atchoarena and Delluc (2001) indicated this failure when they said that there is usually a mismatch between acquired skills and market needs. This is further supported by Action on Rural Education, a Non-Governmental Organization as:

The current link between TVET and industry is weak. As a result, most TVET graduates fall short of industries' skills requirements and are unable to secure jobs after completing school.

Where does the problem occur? Is there a lack of quality training and training environment regarding technical and vocational education, or are concepts during the training not well grasped? If the latter is assumed to be the problem; for, most polytechnics in Ghana attach their students to industries for practical work, then, the crisis might be arising from the medium of instruction.

The language policy of Ghana makes the mother tongue (L1) the medium of instruction from kindergarten to primary three (P3) after which English becomes the medium of instruction. English as a second language has

its own attendant problems. One problem is reflected in the quotation below:

The foreign medium has caused brain fag, put an undue strain upon nerves of our children, made them crammers and imitators, unfitted them for original work and thought and disabled them from filtering their learning to the family or the masses (Gandhi, 1916: 318-20) .

From the above, one can attribute the mismatch between acquired skills and market needs in Ghana's technical and vocational training to the harm of the medium of instruction. Most students in technical education need a skill and that skill can best be acquired through a language that can best be used as a medium of instruction, rather than the imposed language.

To buttress the above, Dei (1996:7) states:

Educators have a responsibility to deliver the right of education to the youths. They have that responsibility to teach youths about diversity of human experiences and to provide them with the necessary skills required to function in the contemporary society.

Learners at the technical and vocational level are denied this right and are grappling with a language the educational system uses as a measure of their fate of progression to the *next* level. Polytechnics and technical universities in Ghana require a credit in English and Mathematics before applicants are offered admissions. Apraku (2011) further illustrates the frustration that technical and vocational graduates go through by pointing out that the few brilliant students who attain the final certificates from the polytechnics are not only advised but for their own interest have to write the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) or the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE) before they can get admission into the university.

The question Amedorme and Fiagbe (2013:254) posed is very relevant here:

... as a country, is it the English Language and Mathematics that we are looking for or the advancement in science and technology?

The answer is obvious. Technological advancement is the way to national development. English as a language is to aid the transfer of ideas and ideas can be translated into any language for the purposes of instruction. Any appropriate and acceptable L1 in Ghana for any locality for the purposes of technical and vocational education and training is what we need as a nation to advance

technologically. Higher educational institutions have to take a second look at the entry requirement for technical and vocational students who excel in their areas and need to continue but do not possess a pass in either Mathematics or English.

If this situation is not given a second look, many brilliant people who are into technical and vocational education will always divert as a result of frustration, as indicated by Apraku (2011).

The language argument – L1 or L2?

Many arguments have been presented regarding L1 and L2: the best way to go. These arguments rage on in nations where L2 is imposed as an official language due to multiplicity of languages.

In India, where English is used as a medium of instruction in the universities, concerns were raised as they switched over from L1 to L2 as medium of instruction. Gajendragadkar (1967) argues that it is academically unsound to require the students to switch over to English as the medium of instruction as soon as they enter the university campus. Such a switchover affects the quality of education and fails to evoke their response owing to absence of receptivity. An absence of receptivity creates a lacuna that is quite difficult to bridge because the learner struggles to follow instructions in a language that has broken chains with the thought of the learner, and the reconciliation of desired skills and concepts to be acquired rather widens. Cummins (1984) indicated that solid foundation in the students' native language best prepares them for learning in English.

What happens in India is at the higher education level but there is dissatisfaction. People at the university level have built a strong L2 foundation and there is foregrounding for them to refer to and make linguistic and cognitive linkages despite L2 medium of instruction. Ghana, unlike India, starts with the L2 medium of instruction so early in the child's life. The foundation in both the L1 and L2 is weak and grasping of concepts becomes so elusive.

The Indians in their postcolonial language planning efforts suggested regional languages in all disciplines and at all stages of university education. This is due to the multi-lingual situation in India. The situation in Ghana is not different. Vocational and technical education in Ghana could espouse the dominant mother tongues as medium of instruction in technical and vocational institutions in the various regions to enable learners acquire the necessary employable skills that can make graduates self-reliant. This could also produce graduates who would be creative enough and skills oriented as well to meet the needs of the nation. The argument of marketability and nationalism would arise. The study of

English as a subject at the primary and junior high schools would be enough to be used as a lingua franca. English language could also be taught as a utility language but not an examinable language that would be a determiner for success and progression to the higher level. That solves the marketability issue.

The issue of nationality and nationalism is even betrayed when a foreign language is used. Gajendragadkar (1967) writes that considerations of national pride which have a legitimate place in the national education require that we no longer accept English as its medium. The national pride is further emphasized by Gbedemah (1975) as he quotes a poem that was sent to the Parliament of Ghana about choosing a national language entitled "The Tongue". The ending of the poem goes:

*If we lose our tongue,
We lose our soul.*

The dangers that beset the language policy of Ghana especially in our technical and vocational education are perilous. Technical and vocational education has a national focus of producing competent middle level technical and vocational workers with adept knowledge and skills to make the nation move. Can an L1 suffice for technical and vocational instructions so as to focus on the needed skills and develop them adequately for national advancement? The English Language acquired at the basic level could be enough for essential communication. It is time to look at national development through the lens of L1 as a medium of instruction at the technical and vocational institutes.

DISCUSSION

What needs to be questioned is the method of delivery. What is the emphasis during the period of the programme? Is the emphasis on the skills that can match the market needs?

The focus of technical and vocational training is employable skills. How can these skills be acquired with little or no problems? Instruction plays a key role. If a learner battles with instruction as to how to perform a practical activity, the desired skills cannot or can hardly be acquired.

To overcome the existing problem, some have called for an overhaul of the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector. Boateng (2012), citing Lillies and Hogan (1983), says a whole school curriculum orientation needs to be done to the Ghanaian educational system. This author is aware of the reforms in the curriculum that integrated the technical aspect into the junior high level in Ghana. The problem rests in the way West African Examinations Council has placed premium

on the theory and not the practical aspect. If a learner is taught both theory and practical and not examined on the practical, the seriousness and interest on the practical on the part of learners and instructors would wane. Implementation of the curriculum and its examination is the problem and Ghana as a nation should work at the skills acquisition point as stipulated by McElvery et al. (1997). They say what are needed are advanced technical skills, collaboration and teamwork as well as effective leadership.

Anamuah-Mensah (2004) also points out how technical and vocational education is necessary to accelerate wealth creation of a nation and for that matter Ghana. This cannot be done without leadership commitment and a political will to change certain outmoded policies that were originated to aid the colonizer. For others, what leads to the failure of technical and vocational education in many nations are inadequate technical and vocational institutions, lack of materials and unqualified teachers who are supposed to impart knowledge to the learners. It is true that the number of technical and vocational institutions is much far less than the number of senior high schools in Ghana, according to a Ministry of Education report (2003). However, how many come out of the few institutions well qualified to enter any industry or set up their own business. Lack of materials may not be a point strong enough to make the graduates of TVET so ill-equipped in employable skills after their programmes of study.

The general performance of technical and vocational oriented people in Ghana on the part of the English language is poor. When such people are instructed in a language that is already a barrier, the consequence will be a push of ill-equipped trainees to a terminal point. They come out without the necessary skills to be absorbed into the job market, and/or without initiative and creativity to start a business on their own.

Many a time, governments have been blamed for non-commitment to technical and vocational education in Ghana. These blames have always been on the part of provision of structures and materials. An instance is a recent lamentation by Professor Djan-Fordjour, Rector of Sunyani Polytechnic as reported in *Spy Ghana* 2013 as follows:

It is worrying to see how people who should have known better play down technical and vocational education. For 56 years of nationhood building, apart from Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana who took concrete steps to establish many technical institutions, successive governments have not shown commitment in technical and vocational education and training in Ghana.

No mention has ever been made of the medium of instruction being a factor leading to the production of

graduates unfitted for the nation's needs.

The question of using L1 as a medium of instruction at the technical and vocational level to arrive at getting the necessary people with the desired skills might not have occurred to us as a nation. Had it occurred, the issue of Ghana not being an island and needs to link to the rest of the world would rear its head. Development should be national oriented and focused first: then, the link to the world second. If you have nothing to offer as a nation, who will like to link up with you? When you have the skills and needed technology, others will automatically be compelled to link up with you and if possible learn your language.

The L2 as the medium of instruction has created a yawning gap within the Ghanaian educational system - national needs and policy fulfilling rules are parallel and mismatched. The L2 as a national unifier is an undeniable and undisputable icon as indicated by Gbedemah (1975). Different tribes feel at ease as Ghanaians due to the national language - English. The use of L1 as a medium of instruction does not call for a change in national language. We are looking at ways by which Ghana as a nation can develop technologically without being subservient to a language imposed on its citizens. The aim of the colonizer was to enable him control the colonized. The missionaries who were purely the agents of colonisation saw the need of proselytising through the use of the colonized L1. This indicates that there was something good and is still good of anyone's L1.

Saville-Troike (1988) emphasizes the L1 as being the background knowledge upon which inferences can be made. Technical and vocational trainers and trainees need a language that can best convey the instructional concepts across without frontiers. L1 brings about creativity, creativity brings success, and success, fulfillment. What technical and vocational graduates need are skills that are self-fulfilling and not the grammar of an imposed language that inhibits technological advancement and national development.

It is evident that we might not have materials well-developed enough to start teaching contents subjects in our local languages. Others, like a one-time minister of education, argued that there was lack of qualified personnel as stipulated in the 2002 Presidential Committee report. This cannot be a true statement; for, University of Education, Winneba has personnel enough in about ten Ghanaian languages producing graduates who find themselves at all the levels of education in Ghana. What it takes to start is the political will that bears in mind the needs of a nation in need of personnel with employable skills that can match the need of industries; personnel with creativity and ability to start their own employment. The yardstick for technical and vocational education should not be the same as liberal education.

Conclusion

In a system where conditions are not felicitous enough to help bring creativity but rigidity and imitation of what the colonizers set for us in their own interest, science and technology will continue to suffer. What this rigidity implies here is that our L1 cannot best express our thoughts. This fallacy of thought goes contrary to what Saville-Troike (1988) and Cummins (1984) say about the L1 serving as background knowledge, pre-existing knowledge upon which inferences and predictions can be made to facilitate transfer of what may be learned in a second language. The L1 situation in Ghana is precarious. The linguistic right of every learner in the formal setting of Ghana is denied him or her as early as nine years or below in the name of education. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) refers to this as crime of "linguistic genocide" in education whilst Dei (1996) calls it educational racism. Rights without linguistic rights are poison to the soul and the mind that stagnate creativity and development.

This is exactly the plight of the Ghanaian in education particularly in technical and vocational education. The situation of the Ghanaian students in technical and vocational education is: human right without linguistic rights which is synonymous to denial of opportunities. What a system!

A system that never opens up to the demands of society is a 'murderer' of creativity. Technical and vocational education needs a new face: a face that can ease the mind of the learner from linguistic harassment, an L1 as a medium of instruction to enable learners grasp concepts properly and acquire skills that can match the job market.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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