L1-MLE Pedagogy in Teacher Training: Innovations for Multilingual Education in The Gambia

Clyde Ancarno, Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics and Education, King's College London, UK
clyde.ancarno@kcla.c.uk

Honourable Sidia Jatta, Africanist Linguist and Educator, The Gambia
cheikhsidiyadiatta@gmail.com

Summary
This article explores the implementation of multilingual education (MLE) based on children's first languages (L1s) in The Gambia. It examines a teacher training toolkit designed to integrate these into educational practices. Set against recent policy changes and developments, this study investigates how teacher training and pedagogical innovation can enhance multilingual education policy implementation and classroom practice.

Keywords
Multilingual education
Education policy
Teacher training
Pedagogic innovation
The Gambia

Introduction

Although there is ample research supporting L1-based multilingual education (Benson, 2017), many countries, including The Gambia, face implementation challenges due to the historical exclusion of African languages.

Our article focuses on a non-commercial teacher training toolkit co-developed with teachers to empower primary school teachers to incorporate learners' L1s into their resources. The toolkit aligns with current debates about the need to integrate national languages into Gambian education. It promotes the use of multiple languages in the classroom, echoing L1-based MLE's focus on "the purposeful and systematic use of learners' strongest languages for literacy and learning" (Benson, 2017, p. 20) before introducing other official/national/international languages as additional languages of instruction (Benson, 2021).

We compare our teacher training with the objectives of Gambian education policies, specifically the 2023 first language-in-education policy recommending the use of national languages from early childhood development (ECD) to Grade 3. Our findings offer insights into how pedagogical innovation can advance multilingual education policy and practice in The Gambia, bridging the gap between policy and practice.

The Gambia's Linguistic Landscape

The Gambia recognizes seven national languages: Mandinka, Pulaar (Fulfulde), Olof, Sarahule, Jola, Seereer, and Manjaku, each with various dialects spoken beyond its borders. Mandinka, Pulaar, and Sarahule are spoken in more countries in West Africa than the other four, which are mostly confined to The Gambia and Senegal. For instance, Pulaar/Fulfulde is spoken in twenty countries in Africa, including the Central African Republic. Mandinka and Sarahule are spoken in The Gambia, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso, among others.

Variation among these languages is complex and under-researched. Mandinka, with the widest range of speakers in the country, has varieties determined by factors such as the district, community, and region to which its speakers belong. Such variation affects the development of learning materials in the national languages. Although the different varieties of these languages are largely inter-intelligible, none of them is perceived as a standard or more acceptable than others—or at least there seems to be no agreement as to which varieties should be used over others in prestigious domains such as education.

Since its colonization, The Gambia's formal education system has been largely dominated by English. Until the 2023 official language-in-education policy, attempts to integrate Indigenous languages in education were unsuccessful. A recent language mapping exercise aiming to determine which language should be used as a language of instruction revealed that apart from Mandinka, Pulaar, and Olof—which are spoken across the country—the remaining four languages are only spoken in specific areas. For instance, Sarahule would be used as a language of instruction in some schools in the upper river region (URR) because the Sarahule-speaking population, except for two villages in Jara east district, is concentrated mainly in that region.

Even in schools where a single language predominates, minority language speakers will likely be present, necessitating explanations in their L1s. Teachers will therefore need to continue using languages other than the primary language of instruction to enhance comprehension and facilitate learning even after the implementation of the new policy.

Despite the history of excluding national languages from education, characterized by strict English-only policies where teachers and learners using a minoritized language could be severely punished, these languages have a long history of supporting learning, such as through translation and summaries in the national languages (flexible multilingualism). In recent years, this oral use of national languages to help children understand what they are learning has become widely accepted and encouraged. As academic literature and recent discussions in The Gambia have shown, integrating national languages into education is crucial for educational equity and quality in The Gambia because all children, regardless of their linguistic background, can access education in a language they understand. The benefits are manifold—for example, it not only improves comprehension and learning outcomes but also fosters a sense of cultural identity and pride among students. However, so far challenges to the implementation of L1-based MLE programs in The Gambia have been numerous.

Challenges in Implementing L1-based MLE

In The Gambia, the terms "mother tongue," "Indigenous languages," "local languages," "Gambian languages," and "national languages" are often used interchangeably when discussing multilingual education. Debates regarding attempts to integrate national languages in education are therefore to be understood as being driven by a desire to allow children to learn in their L1.

Research on L1-based MLE in Africa reveals many challenges. In his seminal article, Stroud (2001) reported that the problems foiling attempts to use African languages in education were widely documented, including misconceptions regarding the purpose of this practice (Kioko et al., 2014), the often-cited lack of resources and teacher training issues, the low literacy status of some African languages (UNESCO, 2014), inconsistencies in writing systems (Benson & Young, 2016), unstable policy contexts and/or a lack of governmental support (Trudell, 2016), inadequate pedagogical design and assessment systems (Zamora et al., 2024), and language ideologies that undervalue African languages (Childs, 2020).

Research on The Gambia echoes these findings (e.g., Igboanusi, 2014). Ancarno, Bouy and Jeng (2024) discuss the specific challenges of an early parallel biliteracy program, prescribing equal literacy lessons in English and one national language from grade one to grade three. They highlight "practical hurdles" (Ancarno, Bouy & Jeng, 2024, p. 177), such as the challenges pertaining to national language teacher training, the low literacy status of the national languages, inconsistencies in spelling in the national languages, and the need to improve teaching material quality (including but not limited to national language teaching material). They also reveal less commonly discussed challenges in The Gambia, namely language ideological beliefs and limited expertise and experience in the national languages.

Insights into the difficulty of integrating national languages in education in The Gambia, especially now that interest among educators, academics, and the general public is high, can be found beyond the academic literature. These are crucial given the lack of literature on language in education in The Gambia. One of the authors, the Honourable Sidia Jatta, has spoken extensively about these challenges. Early in his career, he had to discontinue a pilot project using national languages as the medium of instruction in three schools due to a lack of governmental support and the need to handwrite all resources. The acute awareness of the difficulties of integrating national languages in education among senior educators since government approval of the new language of instruction policy is apparent and reassuring. Momodou Jeng's comments about teacher preparation and the need for support from a range of actors during the July 2024 launch of

our toolkit illustrate this:

> *"Because the policy may be good, but if the implementation of that policy is not well prepared, so that the teacher capacity is built, nothing will happen. And that means the policy is never going to be implemented […] As a ministry, we design the policies and frameworks and guidelines. But the implementation of these policies is going to be only effective if all the stakeholders, including training institutions, including parents, including community leaders, everybody that has a stake in education, play their role in supporting the implementation"* (Jeng is the Director of the Curriculum Research, Evaluation and Development Directorate).

However, this understanding alone does not guarantee the success of this new language-in-education policy, as many challenges still exist.

Case Study: Implementation in The Gambia

The teacher training toolkit provides practicing teachers and teacher trainees with the confidence and proficiency to facilitate the use of students' L1(s) in the classroom. Developed between 2021 and 2024 in collaboration with five teachers, it involved consultation with numerous stakeholders, including policymakers, national language desk officers of the Curriculum Research, Evaluation & Development Directorate (Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education), teachers, head teachers, and representatives from educational charities.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the multilingual resources for primary schools in The Gambia toolkit

Source: Ancarno, Little and Jatta (2024)

The toolkit comprises nine units (Figure 1). The first five units focus on helping teachers understand the basic principles of L1-based MLE, while the remaining four units guide teachers in applying these principles to create written teaching and learning materials that embrace all the languages spoken by their learners. Additionally, the toolkit includes a Multilingual resource bank, which we plan to update continually based on teachers' suggestions.

This toolkit will be used to deliver a course at Gambia College, the national teacher training institution in The Gambia. In the 2024–2025 academic year, it will train approximately 500 first year teacher trainees (they are trained as generalists). Feedback from teachers, policymakers, and educators has been extremely encouraging, and we anticipate more in-depth feedback throughout the pilot phase.

We foresee that the toolkit will have a tangible impact on teacher education, as the college has previously been unable to focus on multilingual pedagogy in its curriculum. The Multilingual resource bank is also timely and will complement the textbooks and other materials being developed in the national languages for the new language of instruction policy.

Discussion and Conclusion

The toolkit promotes linguistic inclusivity by encouraging the use of any language spoken by learners, complementing government initiatives for integrating national languages. As the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, Ebrima Sisawo, is reported to have stated, "Our language-in-education policy is evidence of our commitment to cultural heritage, promoting multilingualism, and nurturing well-rounded individuals who can communicate effectively in a globalised world" (Jadama, 2023).

We also had to decide which languages to translate resources for the Multilingual resource bank into. Due to financial constraints, the toolkit focuses on the seven national languages of The Gambia, as well as Gambian Sign Language, Arabic, English, and French. The latter three languages are used in schools as languages of instruction and/or are taught as academic subjects (e.g., Arabic is used as a language of instruction in Madrassas), while a growing number of schools for deaf and hard of hearing children are opening throughout The Gambia.

Independent small-scale projects adopting an L1-based MLE approach in The Gambia are scarce but timely. They foster more innovation than officially sponsored large-scale programs because they are free from systemic barriers (e.g. standardized testing and assessment systems) and promote discussions that can shape future language-in-education practices and policies. This was evident during a reflective group discussion in 2024 on "Creating multilingual library corners" (led by Amadou Sowe, a teacher and author of children's stories and books in Pulaar, and Alhagie Cham, an experienced primary school teacher and educator), where

valuable suggestions were made including establishing a multilingual unit to oversee such initiatives.

However, ensuring the long-term effectiveness of the toolkit will be challenging due to its embedding within the broader narrative of language-in-education policy in The Gambia and Africa more generally. This context has historically led to the partial or complete failure of many initiatives aimed at integrating African languages into education. As Stroud notes, "Mother-tongue programmes and policies seldom deliver what they promise, and often, with respect to stated goals and ideologies (cognitive enhancement, language maintenance, etc.), must be classed as downright failures" (Stroud, 2001, pp. 339–340). The reasons for these failures are well-understood (e.g., financial constraints, language ideologies, lack of public/political support).

More contextually and linguistically sensitive research and analysis are therefore needed to truly advance scholarly research into language-in-education in The Gambia, including work questioning the very concepts at the core of L1-based multilingual education. This applies to the term "translanguaging," which has notably been criticized for inadvertently reproducing colonial perspectives on multilingualism—for example, the practice of translanguaging is seen to reflect Western epistemological frameworks taking precedence over Indigenous systems and ways of using language in multilingual situations (Meighan, 2023). Others have also highlighted that the application of translanguaging pedagogy in African contexts requires careful consideration of local linguistic dynamics and cultural factors. Mpofu (2021), for example, suggests that it can be time-intensive and ethnic-based, while Mbirimi-Hungwe (2022) points out that it can reveal classroom language politics, with majority language speakers potentially dominating minority language speakers.

We hope that future work will address issues of decoloniality, especially as these are evoked in the increasingly frequent conversations regarding the use of Gambian languages in prestigious domains such as education. It should also be mindful to include Gambian Sign Language as well as verbal languages—for example, through collaboration with the Gambia Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing—as we did in our toolkit.

References

Ancarno, C., Bouy, B., & Jeng, M. (2024). Challenges for Gambian primary schools aiming to enhance literacy through the use of national languages. In C. Reilly, F. Chimbutane, J. Clegg & E.J. Erling (ed.s) *Multilingual learning: Assessment, ideologies and policies in Sub-Saharan Africa* (pp. 171–196). Routledge.

Ancarno, C., Little, S., and Jatta, S. (2024). *Multilingual resources for primary schools in the Gambia. Multilingual Education in the Gambia (MEG)* https://megambia.com/toolkit/

Barruga, B. M. (2024). Classroom implementation by Masbatenyo public elementary teachers of the mother tongue-based multilingual education policy: A case study. *Language Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-024-09691-w

Benson, C. (2017). Multilingual education for all: Applying an integrated multilingual curriculum model to low-income contexts. In: H. Coleman (Ed.), *Multilingualisms and development* (pp. 1–20). The British Council.

Benson, C. (2021). L1-based multilingual education: What is working and what is slowing us down. In P. Harding-Esch & H. Coleman (Eds.), *Language and the sustainable development goals: Selected papers from the 12th Language and Development Conference* (pp. 17–30). The British Council.

Benson, C., & Young, C. (2016). How can MTB-MLE be carried out in classrooms where three or more local languages are represented as mother tongues? In *Good answers to tough questions in mother tongue-based multilingual education* (p. 9). SIL International.

Childs, T. (2020). Language endangerment in Africa. *Oxford research encyclopedia of linguistics*. Oxford University Press.

Igboanusi, H. (2014). The English-only language education policy in The Gambia and low literacy rates. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 17*(5), 558–569. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2013.851642

Kioko, A. N., Ndung'u, R. W., Njoroge, M. C., & Mutiga, J. (2014). Mother tongue and education in Africa: Publicising the reality. *Multilingual Education*, *4*, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13616-014-0018-x

Mbirimi-Hungwe, V. (2022). Translanguaging pedagogy as seen through a critical literacy lens. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, 40(4)*, 469–480. https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2022.2077226

Meighan, P. J. (2023). Colonialingualism: Colonial legacies, imperial mindsets, and inequitable practices in English language education. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education, 17*(2), 146–155. https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2022.2082406

Mpofu, N. (2021). Possibilities of translanguaging pedagogy for sustainable education in Africa. In *Sustainable development in Africa: Fostering sustainability in one of the world's most promising continents* (pp. 221–237). Springer International Publishing.

Trudell, B. (2016). *The impact of language policy and practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa*. UNICEF.

UNESCO. (2014). *MTB-MLE: Mother tongue-based multilingual education; lessons learned from a decade of research and practice*. UNESCO.

Zamora, N. C. L., Acuña, M. J. B., Macahilig, H. B., San Juan, M. P. C., & Valencia, R. H. G. (2024) Evaluation of the mother tongue based multilingual education policy, *Policy Brief Series, 8(9), 1–7.* https://www.pnuresearchportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Policy-Brief-Vol.-8-s.-9.pdf