

Factors affecting language policy choices in the multilingual context of Namibia: English as the official language and medium of instruction

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As most African countries, Namibia is multilingual, but the linguistic diversity is not fully appreciated nor supported in the language education policy. Nationalist one nation – one language ideologies and policy makers' desire to remove Afrikaans from its former power position and replacing it with English have affected the choices of the official language and the medium of instruction policies. The current language education policy has contributed to low academic achievements and high school dropout rates. This article discusses the development of the language education policy in independent Namibia within the critical language policy framework. The language education policy is re-evaluated from a historical perspective in order to understand the current situation and the recent developments. The method is historical-structural analysis of institutional texts. The focus is on the choice of the official language and the medium of instruction policy. The covert policy is analysed in light of educational statistics and examination results. The analysis reveals that the language education policy has remained almost the same during the years of independence, and the efforts of extending mother tongue instruction to senior primary have not been successful. Despite the twofold emphasis of the overt policy of promoting the local languages and making the citizens proficient in English, the covert policy is more English-oriented. Multilingual teaching practices and pedagogies, including translanguaging, are discussed as a feasible option to promote more flexible multilingual education and to strengthen the learners' multilingual identities.

Keywords: language education policy, medium of instruction, multilingual education, translanguaging, Namibia

1 Decolonisation, globalisation and education

It can be argued that on the linguistic and intellectual level, the decolonisation process has not been completed in most post-colonial countries (Bokamba, 2007). It has followed a European nationalist ideology of “one language – one nation”, and the policy makers have often chosen a European language as the (only) official language and, consequently, given it a central role in education as the medium of instruction (MoI).

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Language attitudes and ideologies affect language planning, which can either promote multilingualism or constrain it, as pointed out by Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2015, pp. 1–2). They state that the one language – one nation ideology has harnessed the schools to establish national unity based on monolingualism. A competing ideology, linguistic diversity and multilingualism in education, emphasizes children’s right to mother tongue instruction. According to Kamwangamalu (2013), language planning in post-colonial African countries has been informed by two conflicting ideologies: decolonisation and internationalisation. Decolonisation has entailed replacing the ex-colonial language by indigenous languages whereas internationalisation has resulted in maintaining the ex-colonial language as a means of wider communication and of obtaining economic progress. Most recently, globalisation has reinforced and extended the ideology of internationalisation. This has further strengthened the role of English and increased the volume of the voices of the parents who demand instruction in English for their children in order to give them equal chances in the new world order.

Acquisition planning as a vital part of language planning is likely to occur concurrently with corpus and status planning (Menken & García, 2010, p. 251). This has indeed occurred in Namibia where the discussions concerning language policy for schools took place simultaneously with the choice of the official language. The choice of the MoI was essentially influenced by the intention of the policy makers to make the citizens of the future independent Namibia proficient in the official language through education.

In this article, I intend to describe and analyse the development of the language education policy (LEP) in basic education in independent Namibia. The focus will be on the choice of the official language and the medium of instruction (MoI). There are several studies and articles written on the LEP in independent Namibia: Brock-Utne (1997), Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir (2001), Harris (2011), Töttemeyer (2010), just to name a few. They all reveal problems caused by the prevalence of English in the present LEP. In this article, I re-evaluate the LEP from a historical perspective in order to understand the current situation and the recent developments within the critical language policy research framework.

The method I use is historical-structural analysis (Tollefson, 2006, pp. 48–49) of institutional texts. The research questions I intend to study are:

- 1) What historical-structural factors have affected the choice of English as the only official language?
- 2) What is the present LEP and what factors have affected its development?
- 3) How does the overt LEP differ from the covert LEP?

I first describe the multilingual reality of Africa in general and of Namibia in particular and set the Namibian LEP in a wider African context (Section 2). I then present a theoretical framework for the analysis (Section 3) and after that, my data and methods (Section 4). I then analyse the arguments on which the choice of the official language was made (Section 5), as the choice that was made has influenced the LEP to a great extent. I present the timeline of the different phases of the LEP development and evaluate the LEP in Namibia (Section 6). I also discuss the possibility of introducing new multilingual approaches such as *translanguaging pedagogies* (García & Wei, 2014) into teacher training as a means of reinforcing the role of national languages in basic education.

2 Multilingualism and language policy in Namibia

In this section, I first discuss African multilingualisms and choice of official language before presenting the Namibian languages and their use in formal education.

2.1 African multilingualisms and the choice of official language

African societies are pervasively multilingual from both societal and individual perspectives (Bokamba, 2007). A typical African speaks from three to five or six languages which are represented in concentric circles. The home language(s) (the innermost circle) is/are often (but not always) (a) minority language(s) with possibly no written form. Surrounding the home language(s) there may be (a) national or vehicular indigenous language(s) that may be used as (a) school language(s). Surrounding them, there is an international high prestige language, a heritage from the colonial era (Zsiga et al., 2014, pp. 1-2). In the case of Namibia, these circles would be represented by an (indigenous) home language(s) for use in home and immediate surroundings, a regional language or Afrikaans as (a) vehicular language(s) and English as the official language (cf. Pütz, 1995, p. 248).

Most African countries have adopted the language of their former colonizers as the official language, or one among several official languages. Namibia did not follow this pattern when it became independent in 1990. After World War I, the former German rule (1884–1915) ended and the League of Nations awarded the mandate of Namibia to South Africa. English and Afrikaans replaced German as official languages and Afrikaans was used in administration and as the MoI in secondary and most primary education (Frydman, 2011, pp. 178–189). It was the second largest language group as regards the number of native speakers: 10.5% of the population whereas English was the first language (L1) of only 0.8% (UNIN, 1981, p. 5). Therefore, Afrikaans would have seemed a natural choice for an official language. However, English was chosen as the only official language for reasons that are discussed in Section 5. The Namibian Constitution (1990, p. 10) states unequivocally in Article 3 on Language, sub-article 1: ‘The official language of Namibia shall be English’. The use of any other language as MoI is not prohibited however (sub-article 2).

2.2 The Namibian languages

The classification of Namibian languages is not simple as different language names or *glossonyms* are used in different contexts. In some contexts, an upper-level name, that is, a *hyperglossonym* (a cover language name for a group of languages), is used to designate a language, whereas in other contexts, a lower-level glossonym is used to designate the same language. This has been illustrated by Lusakalalu (2007) for example in the case of Oshiwambo, a language spoken by 49% of the population, mainly in the north of the country:

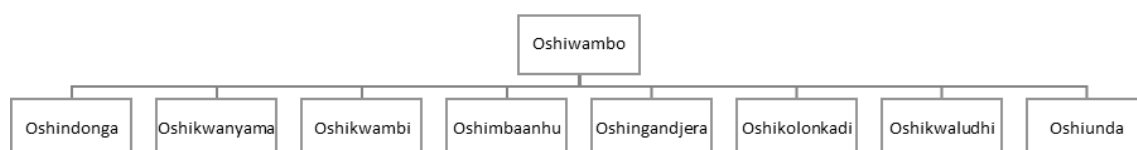


Figure 1. Oshiwambo and its subcategories. (Lusakalalu 2007, p. 90).

Lusakalalu has shown that Namibian media tends to use more upper-level names, in this case ‘Oshiwambo’, whereas the educational sector uses the glossonyms of a lower category level, in this case ‘Oshindonga’ and ‘Oshikwanyama’.

There are seven national languages: Diriku [Rugeiriku, Rumanyo], Herero [Otjiherero], Kwangali [Rukwangali], Kwanyama [Oshikwanyama], Mbukushu [Thimbukushu], Ndonga [Oshindonga] and Tswana [Setswana] and 21 other indigenous languages. They belong to either the Niger-Congo Bantu languages or to the Khoisan languages. Some of the Khoisan languages are either endangered or becoming extinct. According to the 2011 census figures, the main indigenous languages are:

- Oshiwambo [Kwambi, Kwanyama, Ndonga, etc.] spoken by 49% of households
- Nama/Damara [Khoekhoegowab] spoken by 11% of households
- Kavango spoken by 9% of households. Kavango is a geographically coined hyperglossonym for the three languages spoken along the Kavango River in the North-East of Namibia: Rumanyo [Diriku], Rukwangali [Kwangali] and Thimbukushu [Mbukushu] (Lusakalalu, 2007, pp. 93–94).
- Otjiherero [Herero] spoken by 9% of households.

According to the 2011 census, English is the L1 of 3.4% and German of 0.9% of the population whereas Afrikaans is spoken by 10% of households.

2.3 The school languages

Bamgbose (2004) distinguishes between three main categories according to the legacy of the former colonial LEPs in Africa. British and Belgian colonizers favoured basic education in African languages whereas French, Portuguese and Spanish policy was to impose the language of the colonial power. In the third category are for example countries that have not been colonised by European countries and that have a strong tradition of promoting indigenous languages in education, such as Ethiopia or Eritrea. Other countries belonging to this category have divergent language education policies from the former coloniser, such as Madagascar, where despite the French influence, Malagasy has been promoted as MoI, mainly due to its predominant position. Countries such as Namibia or Cameroon also belong to this category because of the dual colonial influence. Both were first colonised by Germany and later by South Africa (Namibia) and Britain and France (Anglophone and Francophone provinces of Cameroon, respectively). In the case of Namibia, Bamgbose states that the South African influence means that some African languages were used in teaching (Bamgbose, 2004). The rationale behind the mother tongue medium teaching was however that of the apartheid ideology, imported by the South-African rule, and it has affected the status of mother tongue education up to the present day (Alexander, 2001, pp. 9–22).¹

The objective of the South African “homeland” divide-and-rule policy was to keep the different linguistic and ethnic populations apart and to underline their mutual unintelligibility. An important element within the apartheid system was education (Legère et al., 2000). The main objective of the educational system was to maintain the socio-economic *status quo* of the different ethnic and linguistic groups: Each of them had their own schools and curricula. African children were not supposed to go beyond primary schooling. They followed an inferior *Bantu education* curriculum (Alexander, 2001, p. 16).

The school languages are presented in Table 1 with reference to some other names of the same languages and the language group they belong to. All the other African languages belong to the Niger-Congo / Bantu language group except the two Khoisan languages, Ju|'hoansi and Khoekhoegowab [Nama/Damara]. Namibian Sign Language is the fourteenth school language.

Table 1. School languages.

Language group	National Curriculum 2010/2016	Other names
Indo-European / Germanic	Afrikaans English German	
Khoisan	Ju 'hoansi Khoekhoegowab	!Xo, Kung Nama/Damara
Niger-Congo / Bantu	Oshikwanyama Oshindonga Otjiherero Rumanyo Rukwangali Setswana Silozi Thimbukushu	Ovambo Ambo, Ndonga, Owambo Herero Diriku Kwangali, Kwangare Tswana Kololo, Rozi, Tozvi Mbukushi

As mentioned above, glossonyms used in the educational sector are often lower-level names. Silozi is a Bantu language spoken in the narrow Caprivi region in the north-east, bordering Angola, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia, where it is spoken as well.

The *National Curriculum for Basic Education* (2010) was replaced by the current *National Curriculum for Basic Education* (2016). In the current system, the junior primary consists of the pre-primary and grades 1–3. The MoI in junior primary can be any of the fourteen school languages. English becomes the only MoI from grade four onward. Students take the Namibian Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary (NSSCO) level at the end of grade 11. Those who continue to grade 12 take the Namibian Senior Secondary Certificate Advanced Subsidiary (NSSCAS) level which gives them access to higher education (National Curriculum for Basic Education, 2016, pp. 18–19). The national examinations are taken in English, except for the African languages as subjects. From grade 4 onwards, English is one of the promotional subjects in which students must achieve at least the E grade to pass to the next grade (Government Gazette, 2009; Engstle & Nußer, 2017; National Curriculum for Basic Education, 2016).

3 Language education policy and multilingual education

Language policy has multiple layers and necessitates a multi-layered analysis to discover the agency of different stakeholders and the impact of language attitudes

and ideologies (Johnson, 2013; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). Shohamy refers to LEP as “a mechanism used to create de facto language practices in educational institutions” (Shohamy, 2006, p. 76). At state level, LEP is stated explicitly in official documents such as national curricula. Rarely, if ever, is the overt (*de jure*) policy implemented identically in actual (*de facto*) practices and it is necessary to look for covert policies through examining practices such as textbooks or examinations. In this article, the core of my data is official documents. In the analysis, I discuss the covert policies.

According to Bokamba (2007), the only way of elevating the status of African languages and the self-esteem of their speakers is to introduce multilingual language policies both in education and in societies in general. The Namibian education model is a subtractive or transitional early-exit model as the transition from L1 instruction to English medium takes place after grade three (Wolfaardt, 2005, p. 2358). Research from multiple countries has shown that subtractive and early-exit models correlate with teacher-centred pedagogies (Bunyi, 2005, pp. 134–139), learning problems (Probyn, 2005) and low esteem of indigenous languages. Additive models yield better learning outcomes, higher student involvement and participation (Afitska et al., 2013, p. 158) and empowerment of the local languages (Benson, 2019; Erling et al., 2017).

Flexible multilingual education refers to additive multilingual models that make use of all the linguistic repertoire of the learner. It is based on a multilingual mind-set in which linguistic diversity is seen as a resource. In flexible multilingual education, *translanguaging* in learning situations is considered normal and can be used systematically as a pedagogic resource (Erling et al., 2017, p. 23). Traditionally, bilingualism has been considered a problem in educational settings, and languages have been kept apart (Paulsrud et al., 2017, pp. 11–12). In *translanguaging pedagogies*, however, all the languages present in a classroom are used in a systematic and pedagogic way to enhance learning and value the linguistic background and repertoires of all the pupils (Canagarajah, 2011; García & Wei, 2014; García et al., 2017; Otheguy et al., 2015). Encouraging and training teachers to use translanguaging practices strategically would switch the focus from seeing multilingualism as a problem to seeing it as a resource.

In this paper, the LEP in Namibia is analysed from a historical perspective in order to understand and evaluate the present situation. The previous comprehensive analyses mentioned in the introduction date back to the first two decades of independence in Namibia. It is time, therefore, to look at the development of the policy since then and to evaluate its outcomes.

4 Method and data

The method that is used is a historical-structural analysis of institutional texts. It is a critical language policy approach that emphasizes the influence of social and historical factors on language policy (Tollefson, 2006, p. 48). It began in the 1990s as a reaction to the “neoclassical approach” that had focused on the language planning of the emerging post-colonial nation-states in Asia and Africa. It seeks to understand how external forces affect and control the policymaking processes (Tollefson, 2015).

The factors that explain language policy and planning (LPP) processes fall into two categories: Historical factors affect the language planning process in a given

historical situation. For example, colonialism is a typical explicative factor in post-colonial settings. Structural factors are mechanisms that maintain social, economic, and political inequalities (Tollefson, 2015).

Tollefson presents a framework that is based on the above-mentioned distinction between status, corpus and acquisition planning. Each of these planning processes can be analysed at multiple micro- and macro-levels (Tollefson, 2015, pp. 145–146). I analyse the status-planning process on the macro-level as it is documented in the official policy statements, because they define the official language policy (LP). The development of the LEP concerns acquisition planning. The overt LEP is analysed at macro-level as it is presented in the official LEP statements. The implementation of the official LEP, that is the covert LEP, is analysed at meso- and micro-level through the analysis of curriculum contents, textbooks, exams and educational statistics.

Critical language policy has been criticised by ethnographically oriented scholars for being too deterministic and not capturing the LPP processes (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; Davis, 1999). Ethnographic approaches and critical language policy are not mutually exclusive, however, and combined they ‘offer an important balance between structure and agency’ (Johnson, 2013; Johnson & Ricento, 2015). An ethnographic study is however beyond the scope of this article and the implementation of the LEP is analysed through secondary data such as examination languages and educational statistics. Ethnographic studies about teachers’ beliefs about LEP implementation are reported elsewhere (Norro, 2021).

The data consist of official documents that have been produced and published both before and during the independence.

The documents I use are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The official documents under study.

1. Pre-independence (1981-1989)		
Year	Title	Publisher
1981	<i>Toward a Language Policy for Namibia. English as the Official Language: Perspectives and Strategies</i>	United Nations Institute for Namibia (Lusaka: UNIN)
1984	<i>Education policy for independent Namibia</i>	United Nations Institute for Namibia (Lusaka: UNIN)
2. Independence (1990-2018)		
1993	<i>The Language Policy for Schools 1992–1996 and Beyond</i>	Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC)
2003	<i>The Language Policy for Schools in Namibia. Discussion Document</i>	Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture (MoBESC)
2010	<i>The National Curriculum for Basic Education</i>	Ministry of Education (MoE)
2016	<i>The National Curriculum for Basic Education</i>	Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC)
2018	<i>Basic Education Bill</i>	Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC)

The data contain two documents from the pre-independence era, as it was then that the foundations of the present language policy were laid down by the liberation movement SWAPO (South West Africa People’s Organization) together

with the UNIN (United Nations Institute for Namibia). UNIN was established in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1976 by the UN Council for Namibia. It was an educational body set up to facilitate the education of Namibians in the purpose of taking up roles in the future independent Namibia.

During the 1980s, several documents were published that tried to formulate the education policy for the future independent Namibia. They originated from two politically opposite parties, namely the UNIN in Lusaka, and the government departments in Windhoek. As the latter resulted in very little implementation (Harlech-Jones, 1990, pp. 94–95), they have not been included in my primary data.

One of the core pre-independence documents is the booklet *Toward a Language Policy for Namibia* based on the work of R. Chamberlain, A. Diallo and E.L. John and published by UNIN in 1981. My discussion of the choice of the official language is based primarily on this document. The documents after 1990 are both official and provisional policy statements, discussion papers and national curricula. They are analysed in order to sketch the timeline of the development of the LEP during the years of independence.

5 Choice of the official language

The official status of English in Namibia was stated already in the 1975 SWAPO draft of the Namibian constitution (Lissner, 1976, p. 42) and then further discussed and corroborated in the UNIN (1981) document (Legère et al., 2000). Töttemeyer (2010) states that previous documents did not necessarily promote English as the *only* official language as did the UNIN (1981) document. She also points out that this key document was financed by the Ford Foundation and that it was based on the work of three expatriate, English-speaking scholars. Moreover, it was published after an international conference with strong British and American representation. It can be inferred that foreign influence affected the process to a certain extent.

The rationale for choosing English as the official language was based on eight criteria against which possible options, that is, indigenous Namibian languages, Afrikaans, German, French and English were examined. The criteria were:

1. Unity (suppressing all ethnic and linguistic competitiveness and tribalism).
2. Acceptability (having positive associations).
3. Familiarity (being somewhat familiar to Namibians and preferably having some experience in the school system).
4. Feasibility (cost and effort of implementation).
5. Science and technology (used in these areas, materials published in that language).
6. Pan Africanism (relating Namibia to other African countries).
7. Wider communication (with the rest of the world)
8. United Nations (close collaboration with the UN had already familiarized Namibian negotiators with English as the working language). (UNIN 1981, pp. 37–38)

In the discussion that follows the criteria, indigenous languages are rejected as none of them were spoken by a large majority and throughout the country (criteria 1 and 4–8). Nonetheless, Oshiwambo [Ovambo] was spoken by about a half of the

population. One may ask why it was not chosen as an official language. There is an interesting article by Arthur Pickering, a legal scholar, published originally in *The Windhoek Advertiser* in 1975 and reproduced in Lissner (1976, pp. 50–57) in a slightly abbreviated form. In the article, Pickering discusses the ongoing debate about the fear of ‘Ovambo domination’. As the Ovambos were the most populous ethnic group in Namibia, this had been used as a political tool to maintain the separation of the ethnic groups. There were also tendencies to form an independent Ovambo state (Lissner, 1976, pp. 50–57). It is also interesting that although SWAPO was a ‘multi-national party’, it was predominantly Ovambo (Lissner, 1976, Appendix 1). It can be inferred that Oshiwambo could not be chosen as an official language to avoid opposition from the other ethnic groups.

Afrikaans was acknowledged to be a both familiar and feasible language and therefore a natural choice for an official language. It failed however on two crucial points, unity and acceptability (criteria 1 and 2), as it was considered the language of oppression (UNIN, 1981, p. 39).

Despite the fact that English was spoken by an extremely small percentage of the population, it was considered to best meet the criteria. As SWAPO had already invested it with the character of a language of liberation, Namibians were, according to the document, motivated to learn it (UNIN, 1981, pp. 40–41).

The UNIN document lists a number of educational, socio-political and socio-cultural implications raised by giving English the status of the official language. They included the fear of retarding the development of the local languages, Eurocentric attitudes and planning, linguistic elitism and exclusiveness. The whole idea of the unifying power of a non-indigenous official language is in fact questioned in the discussion and the fact that a common indigenous language would be more powerful in this respect is acknowledged. Though English would theoretically facilitate communication between different groups, the example of many other post-colonial countries had demonstrated that it can easily become the language of a political elite and contribute to class-formation.

Despite the critical considerations presented above, English was chosen as the only official language. As has been shown, the arguments were political and followed the “one language – one nation” ideology (Beck, 1995, p. 215). Though Namibia became independent some thirty years later than most of the African countries, its language planning followed the same arguments that Bokamba states as the main arguments advanced by various African leaders to establish European languages as official languages. They are national unity, national development, efficiency of wider communication and cost-effectiveness (Bokamba, 1995, p. 17). As Frydman (2011) points out, Namibia could have followed a more informed path to LP development than the other African countries. However, the choices that were made were “based almost exclusively on ideology and only retrospectively rationalized with functional and linguistic arguments” (Frydman, 2011, p. 182), resulting in a monolingual policy.

There is at least one structural factor that cannot be ignored. English was spoken as a second language by the white population and by a small group of Namibians who had been formed in exile, mostly in English speaking countries. They formed what Töttemeyer calls “Namibian Anglotocracy” or “Anglo-elite” (Töttemeyer, 2010, p. 59). It can be argued that choosing English as the only official language contributed to the maintenance of power within the English-speaking minority.

If we take into account the historical situation and the heavy negative load of Afrikaans, it can be asked whether there really was any other choice for the official

language than English. The question remains, however, if a multilingual policy with several official languages could have been a feasible option. South Africa did adopt a multilingual LP in 1994. It seems that in Namibia, however, the monolingual ideology and the strong positive attitudes towards English with all the political motivations discussed above dictated the LP more than anything else. Frydman (2011) reminds that SWAPO's main objective was not to establish a monolingual LP and then select a language to serve the policy. Rather, the objective was to establish English as the official language, and by so doing, the policy became to be a monolingual one.

The choice of the official language affected directly the choice of the MoI in basic education, as the implementation of English was to take place primarily through basic education for all. The development of the LEP is discussed in the next section.

6 Development of the language education policy

The core documents and amendments of the LEP are presented in Figure 2.

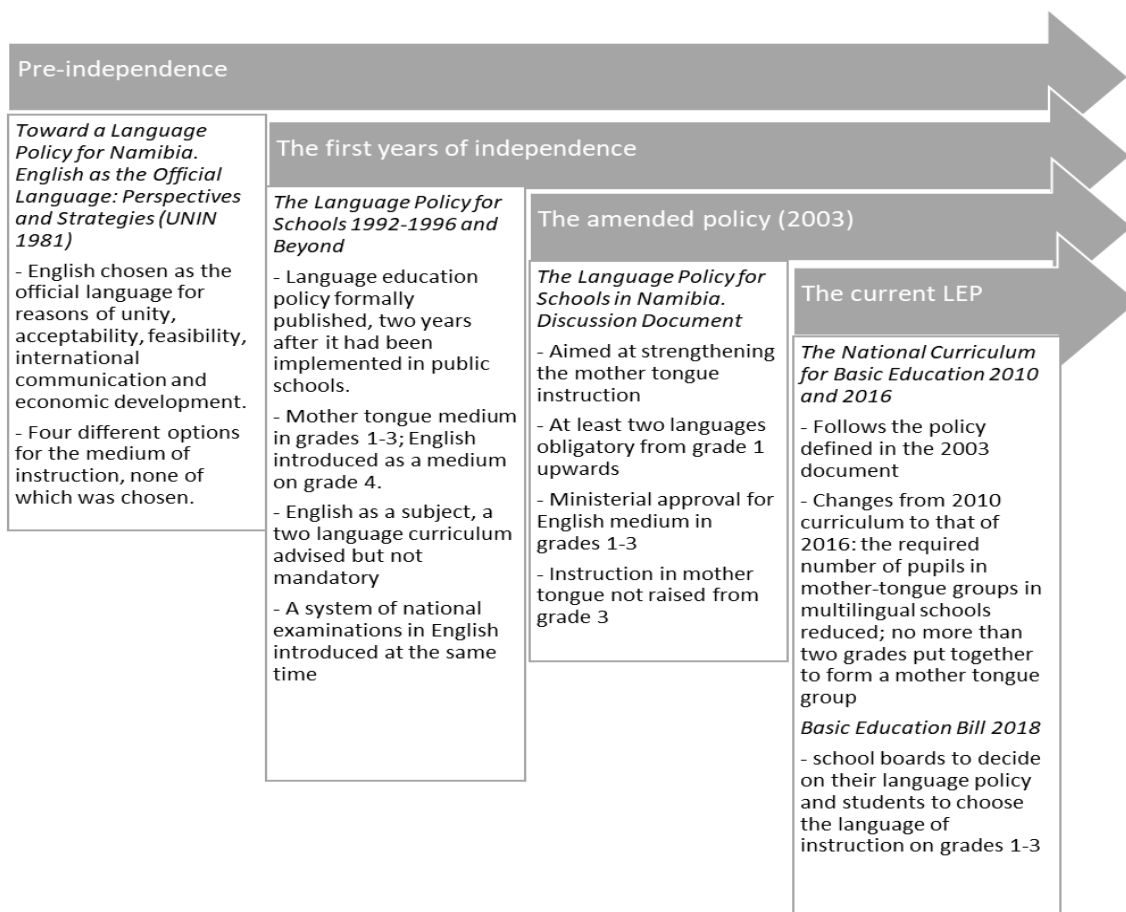


Figure 2. Timeline of the focal phases in LEP development.

The LEP has changed very little during the years of independence. There have been some efforts made by the government to reinforce mother tongue instruction, but no major changes have been made. The latest amendment to the LEP dates from 2018 when the new Basic Education Bill was approved.

The formulation of the LEP started almost a decade before independence and focused on the MoI. The UNIN (1981, pp. 57–58) document lists the pros and cons of mother tongue medium vs. English medium. Arguments for the mother tongue medium are the ones that take into consideration what is advantageous for the child, such as easier concept formation, preservation of cultural identity and better adjustment between home and school. Those connected with English medium tend to look at the matter from the administrator's point of view. They include easier language planning, training of teachers and material production on a national level and cost.

Based on these considerations, the UNIN document then formulates four different options for the MoI. The four options are presented in Chart 1.

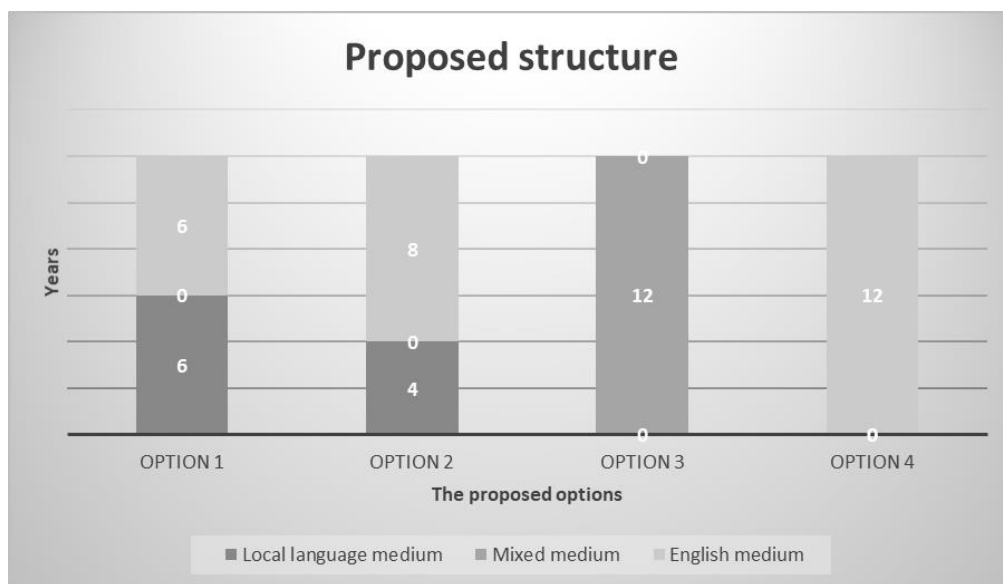


Chart 1. Options for the MoI in basic education (based on UNIN 1981, p. 99).

Options one and two are mother tongue based: for the first six years (Option 1) or four years (Option 2), the MoI is the mother tongue, and after that, the MoI is English. Option three is a bilingual model in which both mother tongue and English are MoI throughout basic education. Option four is an English-only model. In all the four options, English and/or local language are also taught as subjects. The document considers the mixed medium bilingual approach (Option 3) as the pedagogically best option. Options 1 and 2 are seen as pedagogically good options, as well. Nevertheless, none of these bilingual or late-exit models were chosen, the reasons for which are discussed in section 7. First, I sketch the outline of the development of the LEP during the years of independence.

6.1 Formulation of the language education policy during the first years of independence

In July 1991, the Ministry of Education and Culture invited discussion of its draft *Provisional language policy for schools*, cited in Harlech-Jones (1995, pp. 193–194). The language policy was then published in the booklet named *The Language Policy for Schools: 1992–1996 and beyond* (MoEC 1993). Its objectives were to help establish English as the official language by ensuring a sufficient proficiency of all citizens through schooling and to promote the equality of all national languages.

It is worth noticing that, at the same time, the English-medium national examination system was also implemented gradually. As Harlech-Jones rightly points out, “The three hurdles of examinations, all and only in English, will certainly serve to focus attention on the acquisition of English language skills” (Harlech-Jones, 1995, p. 194). Indeed, as has been shown by Shohamy, high-stake exams are powerful tools for determining the value of a language, suppressing language diversity and implementing and perpetuating *de facto* language policies (Shohamy, 2006, pp. 93-109). It can be argued that though the overt policy promotes both the national languages and the official language, the fact that the national examinations were and are all in English, gives the signal that for promotion purposes, English is the one that counts. The covert policy is therefore actually an English-only policy as regards the national examinations.

The 1993 policy left the schools the option of giving English medium instruction even in grades 1 to 3. This was interpreted by some schools to mean that they could offer instruction through an English medium only without any African language instruction (Töttemeyer, 2010, p. 12). That is why the LEP was amended in 2003.

6.2 *Language education policy is amended*

The ‘Language and Development in Southern Africa Conference’ was held in Okahandja in April 2000. One of the outcomes of the conference was that the language policy in schools should be revised in order to strengthen the role of the L1 of the learners during the early years of schooling (Trewby & Fitchat, 2001). Wolfaardt (2005, p. 2) cites informal statistics obtained from a subdivision of the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, according to which in the Windhoek region, 51% of the schools had English as the MoI already from grade 1.

The amended policy made studying at least two languages obligatory for all learners from grade 1. It was also imposed on the schools to give the learners the possibility of studying their own mother tongue up to grade 12 (MoBESC, 2003, p. 4). In addition, English medium instruction in grades 1-3 had to obtain ministerial approval with ‘well-grounded, convincing motivation’. In 2008, 243 schools out of 1677 had obtained ministerial approval (Töttemeyer, 2010, p. 55; Harris 2011, p. 11).

The conference made a recommendation to extend the instruction in the mother tongue beyond grade 3 (MoBESC, 2003, p. 3, footnote 1). It was not followed in the amended policy, however, the reason being the cost. The amended policy clearly did not solve the problem of the high number of English medium schools either, as over 14% of the schools still offered instruction in English only in 2008. The situation has not improved since then. According to the EMIS statistics (2019, p. 25), almost 25% of all pupils in grades 1-3 are enrolled in English medium schools. The report states that this is a deviation from the policy and suggests that the reason for this is that the parents do not understand the objectives of mother tongue instruction.

6.3 *The current language education policy*

Another attempt at extending the instruction in the mother tongue was made in March 2014, but again without success. The then Minister of Education, David Namwandi, introduced a draft for a new language policy that would have extended mother tongue instruction up to grade 5 (Haidula, 2014). The new

language policy was never adopted, and the current *National Curriculum for Basic Education* (2016) follows the former policy.

The MoI is to be the mother tongue, home language or predominant local language in the junior primary phase (pre-primary and grades 1–3). Grade 4 is a transitional year when the MoI changes to English. The curriculum states that it is therefore critical for learners to acquire literacy skills during grades 1–3. In grade 4, mother-tongue or home language should be used “in a supportive role only”, in order to ensure that learners understand the concepts. Experience has shown however, that adequate English literacy skills are not acquired during grades 1–3. For example, Harris (2011) points out that the learners from grades 4–7 in her sample had difficulties in making whole sentences, and many of them had repeated grades. Furthermore, the role of English for promotional purposes is disproportionately prominent. From grade 4 onwards, learners must have awarded an E in English to be promoted.

The examination results show that the policy has not been successful. In years 2008–2012, only 33.4% of the students in grade 12 met the requirements (at least a D) in English as a second language (Ola-Busari, 2014, pp. 229–230) to attain higher education. The results of the current national examinations for NSSCO level, which the learners take at the end of grade 11, were better in 2019: 62.2% of those who took English as a second language obtained a D (EMIS, 2019, p. 49). However, in order to enter the University of Namibia (UNAM) degree programmes, applicants must have at least the symbol C in English as a Second Language or D for English as a First Language. For other subjects, only the five best subjects are counted by adding together the points the applicant has obtained in them.

For comparison, it is worth stating that the NSSCO results were much higher, with some occasional exceptions, for first languages: Afrikaans 81.2%, English 92.5%, Khoekhoegowab 69.8%, Oshikwanyama 82%, Oshindonga 56.2%, Otjiherero 82.4%, Rumanyo 92.7%, and Thimbukushu 89.1%. First languages that were taken by less than 100 students are left out here. The low percentage for Oshindonga might be explained by the fact that it is often the predominant language and studied as a first language also by learners for whom it is not the L1. The figures were lower for other subjects such as biology (34.2%), geography (28.4%), physical science (38.5%), history (23.1%) and mathematics (41.0%). These subjects are only taught and assessed in English. Research evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) as from elsewhere suggest that there are concerns about the validity of L2-medium assessment. It is possible that a student may possess subject knowledge but is incapable of producing it in L2 for linguistic reasons (Clegg & Simpson 2016, p. 369). In the light of the figures presented above, it seems English is one of the major obstacles for academic achievement.

The curriculum expects language awareness of the teachers and obliges them to improve the English skills of all learners, to be aware of their needs and to provide them with opportunities to practice their skills. It also states that English teachers must be kept aware of any particular needs of learners. Teaching the special terminologies of the different subjects is the responsibility of the subject teachers. The above figures suggest that this objective has not been met. As pointed out by Clegg and Afitska (2011), there is a need for multilingual pedagogies in both initial and continuous teacher education in SSA.

According to the curriculum, mother tongue or home language classes will be constituted in multilingual schools when there are at least 15 learners of the same language. It is also stated that multi-grade language classes are to be constituted

if the sufficient number of learners is not otherwise achieved. If the sufficient number of learners is not achieved by combining two grades, the learners will take the predominant local language instead. An extensive review of the Education Act of 2016 was carried out by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture with financial and technical support from UNICEF and the EU in 2015–2016 (MoEAC, 2016; Engstle & Nußer, 2017). In the survey, only 48% of the learners were of the opinion that schools provide opportunities for learning in the mother tongue (24% answered “no”, and 28% did not answer at all).

The review resulted in a new Education Bill, approved by the National Council in 2018. According to the new bill, the school boards are allocated the power of deciding on their language policy, within the limits of the Constitution and the national language policy. In addition, the learners have the right to choose their MoI during the first three years of their schooling “where it is reasonably possible” (Basic Education Bill, 2018). At least in 2019, however, the number of pupils enrolled in English-medium schools remained high, as shown above.

7 Discussion

My first research question was about the historical-structural factors that have affected the choice of English, a language not formerly spoken in Namibia, as the only official language. The analysis shows they are the same as in other post-colonial states: the wish to create national unity and promote national development through the adoption of a language of wider communication. The collaboration between SWAPO and the UN had accustomed the future Namibian elites to the use of English and invested English with the character of a language of liberation. Maintaining the power position of the English-speaking elites can be interpreted as a structural factor in favour of English as the official language.

The second question was about the present language education policy (LEP) and the factors that have affected its development. The choice of the official language directly affected the choice of the medium of instruction (MoI), as basic education was meant to provide all citizens with proficiency in the official language. It can be asked why the bilingual model or the one that would have extended mother tongue instruction up to grade six, that were suggested in the UNIN document, were not accepted. The adopted LEP follows the “default model” of L1-based multilingual education in ex-colonial countries throughout the world (Benson, 2019, p. 32). It has been formulated according to the recommendations of the UNESCO conference held in Bamako in 1951. At that time, three years of mother tongue instruction was considered to be long enough for another MoI to take over (Wolff, 2016, p. 14). Furthermore, the model that was adopted was in fact basically the same as that which had already been the practice in ‘black’ schools until 1989. Whereas ‘white’ pupils had been instructed in their mother tongue – Afrikaans, English or German – throughout their school years, ‘black’ pupils had been taught through the medium of mother tongue during the first three years. The switch of medium had then taken place instantaneously in grade 4 (Harlech-Jones, 1990, p. 79, 89). The only change in the new policy was that the MoI in the upper primary level was English instead of Afrikaans. The main concern of the policy makers seems to have been the implementation of English and the removal of Afrikaans from its position (cf. Töttemeyer, 2010, p. 62).

Alidou (2004, p. 196) argues that there are three main sets of factors behind the problems of MoI in African countries. They are economic, political and pedagogical. Political factors include the reluctance of the African elites to implement a language policy that would bridge the gap between the privileged and non-privileged classes. Ola-Busari (2014, p. 237) points to the lack of political will to make government level efforts to introduce bilingual literacy into the curriculum. This phenomenon, also called the *elite closure* (Myers-Scotton, 1993), is common in many post-colonial countries and has often resulted in the illiteracy of the masses and their suspicion towards education in indigenous languages (Kamwangamalu, 2013). In the case of Namibia, this conception has been reinforced by the history of Bantu education (Alexander, 2001; Harlech-Jones, 1990; Ola-Busari, 2014; Töttemeyer, 2010).

One of the strongest factors that affect the LEP and its implementation in Namibia as elsewhere in Africa is the instrumental or material value of European, international languages (Wolff, 2016, pp. 36–37). Parents want their children to be educated in a European language, because they are seen as vehicles for development, academic success and economic prosperity (Lin & Martin, 2005, pp. 2–3; Qorro, 2009, p. 59; Töttemeyer, 2010). This trend has been further reinforced by globalisation.

Despite the double objective of promoting both the national languages and the official language stated in the overt policy, the covert policy is more English-oriented (Research question 3). All the high-stake examinations are taken in English only and all the textbooks in senior primary (grades 4–7) are in English. The proportion of learners in English medium instruction in junior primary is high, almost 25%. By adopting a subtractive, early-exit transitional education model the former objective has been emphasized at the expense of the latter. Wolff states that most African countries rely mostly on a foreign language as MoI and that mother tongue instruction should be extended to cover at least the whole primary cycle and maintained for at least 50%, as in additive multilingual education models (Wolff, 2016, pp. 15–16). Benson (2019, p. 29), referring to several research studies, concludes that mother tongue instruction has the potential of improving educational quality and equity, and that the mismatch between the MoI and the learner's L1 is one of the major causes of school failure and drop-outs.

Nonetheless, the current LEP is not likely to be dramatically changed. Though the Ministry of Education has tried to reinforce mother tongue instruction, it has not transpired because of the lack of political will and pedagogical and economic resources. A more realistic way forward would be training the teachers to embrace a multilingual approach in class, thus ensuring the development of the pupils in both languages. Introducing elements from *translanguaging pedagogies* (Canagarajah, 2011; García & Wei, 2014; Paulsrud et al., 2017) and other multilingual approaches could open multilingual spaces in classroom and legitimise the multilingual practices that many teachers already probably use. Teachers could draw on the different linguistic repertoires of all learners even in officially monolingual classrooms and without being familiar with all their languages (Menken & Sanchez, 2019) by adopting a *translanguaging stance*, a multilingual pedagogical mind-set (García et al., 2017; Menken & Sanchez, 2019). But teachers will not be able to make this change alone. They need the support and training provided by the educational authorities. This could be done by integrating translanguaging or other multilingual pedagogies either in the

existing modules in initial teacher education or by introducing a whole new module. Similar modules or workshops could also be introduced for in-service teachers for example through the regional offices.

8 Conclusion

As has been shown above, the Namibian LP has been driven mainly by the high esteem of English as a presumably unifying language that would enhance international communication and economic and technical development of the country. Its position as the only official language has informed the LEP which has not proved successful. Changes are needed in order to decrease the dropout rates and to promote the academic achievements.

Attempts have been made by the government to extend mother-tongue instruction to senior primary. These efforts have remained vain because of the lack of political will. That is why major changes in the official policy are not probable in the near future. Instead, changes in pedagogical practices could be introduced. Introducing and legitimising multilingual practices such as translanguaging pedagogies would change the current pedagogical mind-set into a more flexible multilingual one. Teachers have a crucial position as LEP implementers and need to be supported by both initial and continuous education to be able to provide quality multilingual education that will improve academic achievement and strengthen the learners' multilingual identities.

Endnote

¹ In the literature, there are several synonyms for instruction in *mother tongue*, such as *heritage language*, *community language*, *home language* or *L1*. In this article, I use the terms *mother tongue* or *home language* as they are the ones that figure in the *National Curriculum* (2016).

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