

The Language Policy  
for Schools  
in Namibia

Discussion Document  
January 2003



Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture

# THE LANGUAGE POLICY FOR SCHOOLS IN NAMIBIA

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(MBESC)

## Recommendation to the Discussion Document

- The discussion document should be widely discussed before approval.
- The discussion document and the final *Language Policy for Schools in Namibia* should be made available in all local languages and distributed to regional education offices, schools, teacher resource centres, parents, communities and all other stakeholders in education.

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## 1. Background

- 1.1 After Independence in March 1990, the then Ministry of Education, Youth, Culture and Sport began reviewing the language policy for schools. In order to develop a national policy, discussions were held in all regions of the country and a draft policy was developed. After lengthy discussions the agreed policy was issued in the document *Education and Culture in Namibia: The Way Forward to 1996* in 1991.
- 1.2 The following criteria were taken into consideration when the policy was being developed and are still valid today:
  - The expectation that a language policy should facilitate the realisation of the substantive goals of education.
  - The equality of all national languages regardless of the number of speakers or the level of development of a particular language.
  - The cost of implementing the policy.
  - The fact that language is a means of transmitting culture and cultural identity.
  - The fact that for pedagogical reasons it is ideal for learners to study through their mother tongue, particularly in the early years of schooling when basic skills of reading, writing and concept formation are acquired.
  - The need for learners to be proficient enough in English, the official language, at the end of the seven-year primary school cycle in order to gain access to further education as well as to a language of wider communication.
- 1.3 The major innovation in the policy was to ensure that English became the medium of instruction from Grade 4 upwards. Although the policy stated that learners should be taught through the medium of their mother tongue in the early years of schooling and that all languages should be treated equally, the implementation of the policy was not evenly applied over the whole country. Many learners did not have the opportunity to learn through their mother tongues, and many schools did not offer Namibian indigenous languages as subjects for study up to Grade 12 level.

## 2. Rationale

- 2.1 Education in the mother tongue, especially in the lower primary cycle of basic education, is crucial for concept formation as well as literacy and numeracy attainment. In order to be literate, one should not only speak well, but also know the written language, as language is the system of human expression by means of words. For people to be in a position to communicate and understand each other this system needs to be fully func-

tional. A language is able to survive only if its mother tongue speakers communicate in their mother tongue.

- 2.2 In order to cope with its survival in today's world, a language should therefore retain the cultural values embedded in it and the traditional ways of expression. A person's identity is contained in the language and the culture you have inherited from your forefathers. To be an individual in a multicultural society you must possess your cultural identity and traditional norms that you call your own. Nevertheless, a language can only develop to its fullest potential if it is exposed to the influences of an ever-changing society and adapts these influences into its corpus. The indigenous languages should be strengthened by linguistic development through, amongst others, standardisation, harmonisation and the coining of new words. Concurrently, the promotion of mother tongue use should not only be furthered evenly through a language in education policy, that is implemented nationwide, but also through a higher status of mother tongue/indigenous languages within every sector of Namibia.
- 2.3 Shortly after independence in 1990, Namibia perceived the need to have a new language policy for schools in order to promote mother tongue use, alongside English, in schools and colleges of education. A document called *The Language Policy for Schools: 1992-1996 and Beyond*, was formulated and implemented shortly afterwards. However, it was not explicitly outlined how national languages (or mother tongues) should be used in schools. There were discrepancies in the implementation of the language policy from region to region, as policy implementers, due to misinterpretation and manipulation, mainly preferred teaching through English rather than through the mother tongue. Formerly disadvantaged learners were further marginalised in this process, as non-English speaking teachers were expected to teach through the medium of English. Any teaching approach, including the learner-centred approach to teaching advocated by the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, cannot be easily realised if teachers and learners lack the necessary language skills and proficiency.
- 2.4 Proficiency in English does not automatically ensure effective participation in society. One is rather considered an effective participant in society if you are able to communicate and use all the functional tools in your mother tongue to your personal advantage and social benefit. The use of English as a language of wider communication will only further enhance greater participation in social welfare activities. It is against this background that the new policy document, titled *Language Policy for Schools in Namibia*, was revised. The revised document intends to promote the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the formative years of schooling (Grades 1-3) and its continued use as a school subject in further

education. Mother tongue undoubtedly plays a crucial role in the acquisition of any second language, i.e. English in the case of Namibia. English will therefore be used in its official capacity as a medium of instruction and assessment throughout the education system in public schools as from Grade 4 onwards.

### 3. The goals of the policy

- The seven-year primary education cycle should enable learners to acquire reasonable competence in English, the official language, and be prepared for English medium instruction throughout the secondary cycle.
- Education should promote the language and cultural identity of learners through the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in Grades 1-3 and the teaching of mother tongue throughout formal education. Grade 4 is a transitional year in which the mother tongue plays a supportive role in the teaching. Mother tongue should be taught as a subject.
- Schools must offer not less than two languages as subjects from Grade 1.

### 4. Changes to the existing *National School Language Policy 1996 and Beyond*<sup>1</sup>

There are few pertinent changes to the existing policy. These are:

- The strengthening of mother tongue instruction in Grades 1, 2 and 3 through materials development and teacher pre- and in-service training.
- More emphasis for the mother tongues to be taken as First Language subjects from Grade 1 through to Grade 12.
- Emphasis on the fact that the wish by a school, school board and parent community to offer English as medium of instruction from Grade 1 must receive ministerial approval.

<sup>1</sup> One of the outcomes of the Language and Development in Southern Africa Conference held at Okahandja in April 2000 was that the language policy be revised. All recommendations made during the conference have been followed with the exception of that advocating that mother tongue should be the language of instruction beyond Grade 3. The reason why this has not been included is due to the financial implications. Such a change would incur additional funding for the provision of textbooks and teaching and learning materials, whereas materials have already been developed, as part of the educational reform in English from Grades 4 to 7, at considerable cost. (For the full recommendations, see Trewby, R. & S. Fitchat (eds.). 2002. *Language and Development in Southern Africa: Making the Right Choices*, pp. 241-245. Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan.)

## 5. The Language Policy

- 5.1 Grades 1-3 will be taught either through the mother tongue or a predominant local language. If parents or the school wish to use English as the medium of instruction in the Lower Primary phase, permission must be obtained from the Minister of Basic Education, Sport and Culture with well-grounded, convincing motivation.
- 5.2 Grade 4 will be a transitional year when the change to English as medium of instruction must take place.
- 5.3 In Grades 5-7 English will be the medium of instruction. In the Upper Primary phase the mother tongue may only be used in a supportive role and continues to be taught as a subject.
- 5.4 Grades 8-12 will be taught through the medium of English, and the mother tongue will continue to be taught as a subject.
- 5.5 Examinations: Grades 7, 10, and 12 national examinations will be taken through the medium of English, except for the mother tongue that is taken as a subject.
- 5.6 English is a compulsory subject, starting from Grade 1, and continuing throughout the school system.
- 5.7 All learners must study two languages as subjects from Grade 1 onwards, one of which must be English. Where there are sufficient learners from the same language group to form a class, provision must be made for them to study their own mother tongue up to Grade 12.
- 5.8 The only exception to this two-language minimum is for expatriate learners who may be permitted to opt for a one-language curriculum.
- 5.9 Nothing in the policy will prevent a learner taking English, a foreign language and a Namibian language, as long as one of the languages is taken on either first or second language level.
- 5.10 The language options available are:

First-language level	
Afrikaans	English
German	Ju 'hoansi
Khoekhoegowab	Oshikwanyama
Oshindonga	Otjiherero
Rukwangali	Rumanyo
Setswana	Silozi
Thimbukushu	(Portuguese)

## Second-language level

Afrikaans English  
(Other second languages will be developed according to demand.)<sup>2</sup>

## Foreign-language level

French German  
(Portuguese)  
(With the possibility of the further development of other third languages.)

- 5.11 All these languages will have the same weighting for promotional purposes.
- 5.12 In a school where there are a substantial number of learners (20 or more learners) from different language groups, the school must make arrangements to provide instruction in the different languages.
- 5.13 Private schools may throughout the primary cycle (Grades 1-7) use a language other than English as a medium of instruction providing that they will offer at least one other Namibian language as a subject and teach Social Studies in English as provided for in the National Curriculum (as prescribed in Articles 3 and 19 of the Namibian Constitution).<sup>3</sup>
- 5.14 Schools are free to organise co-curricular activities to promote any language and culture. Learners should be sensitised to appreciate the multicultural and multilingual character of Namibia.

<sup>2</sup> See Ministry of Basic Education and Culture. 1998. *Pilot Curriculum for Formal Senior Secondary Education*, p. 9. Windhoek.

<sup>3</sup> Angula, N. 1992. "Language Policy Evolution and Implementation Choices and Limitations". In: *Namibia National Conference on the Implementation of the Language Policy for Schools*. Windhoek: Longman Namibia.

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- 5.1 Grades 1-3 will be taught either through the mother tongue or a predominant local language. If parents or the school wish to use English as the medium of instruction in the Lower Primary phase, permission must be obtained from the Minister of Basic Education, Sport and Culture with well-grounded, convincing motivation.
- 5.2 Grade 4 will be a transitional year when the change to English as medium of instruction must take place.
- 5.3 In Grades 5-7 English will be the medium of instruction. In the Upper Primary phase the mother tongue may only be used in a supportive role and continues to be taught as a subject.
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## Glossary

Certain terms in this policy document are not always used and understood in the same way. Therefore the following definitions are provided. These definitions have been taken from:

1. Crystal, D. 1992. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
2. Richards, Jack C and Platt, J. & H. 1992. *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*. Longman.

Direct quotes from the above are indicated as such below.

### Basic education

Grades 1 to 12 are regarded as *Basic Education* in Namibia (Government of the Republic of Namibia, *Education Act 2001*, Promulgation of Act of Parliament, No. 16 of 2001, Windhoek, 27 December 2001).

### First language

[Generally] a person's mother tongue or the HOME language acquired first. In multilingual communities, however, where a child may gradually shift from the main use of one language to the main use of another (e.g. because of the influence of a school language), *first language* may refer to the language the child feels most comfortable using. Often this term is used synonymously with *native language*.

DNEA (Directorate of National Examinations and Assessment, MBESC) decided to use only *First Language*, *Second Language* and *Foreign Language* to indicate the language levels of different language papers.

### Foreign language

A foreign language is –

a language which is not a native language in a country. A foreign language is usually studied either for communication with foreigners who speak the language, or for reading printed materials in the language.

In this regard the case of German in Namibia can be problematic, because it is the native language of some Namibian citizens, while at the same time it is a foreign language to other Namibian citizens.

In Namibian state schools, languages which can be studied as foreign languages are available from Grades 8 to 12 only.

### Local language

These are Namibian languages which are spoken as first or second languages in multi-lingual communities. Some of these languages are used as *lingua franca* in larger communities and could be termed as *predominant local languages* or *languages of wider communication*. They will thus become second languages for some of the learners in the community.

### Lower primary

In Namibian schools, Grades 1-4 are considered as the Lower Primary phase, with Grade 4 being a transitional year before the learner starts with the Upper Primary phase in Grade 5.

### Medium of instruction

It is the language through which a subject is taught.

### Mother tongue

[Usually] a first language which is acquired at home.

### Namibian/Indigenous languages

It is also necessary to understand what is meant by *Namibian/Indigenous languages* and *national language*. The languages spoken by Namibians belong to three different language families: Niger-Congo (or Bantu languages, as they are also known), Khoesan and Indo-European languages. While all the Indo-European languages had their origin outside Africa, they are not regarded as indigenous, or African or Namibian. Despite the fact that linguists hold different theories on the actual "origin" of Afrikaans, it cannot be denied that linguistically it belongs to the Indo-European family of languages. If *national language* is defined as languages spoken in Namibia as mother tongues by Namibian citizens, then languages such as English, Afrikaans and German could be regarded as national languages, but clearly not as Namibian languages. The latter term indicates languages of African linguistic origin, including languages in the Khoesan and Niger-Congo families. However, for the purposes of organising languages taught in the schools and colleges as either *official language* or *Namibian language*, all the languages not being *official*, can be classified as *Namibian*.

### National language

A *National language* is –

usually considered to be the main language of a nation. For example, German is the national language of Germany. Usually, the national language is also the official language; that is, the language used in government and courts of law, and for official business. However, in multilingual nations, there may be more than one official language, and in such cases the term "official language" is often used rather than "national language".

In a multilingual country like Namibia, there is of course not only one "national language". In the *Constitution of the Republic of Namibia* mention is made of the *national languages* of Namibia as being something different than the *official language* of Namibia.

In this policy document *national language* is used to indicate languages spoken in Namibia as mother tongues by Namibian citizens.

