

# RECLAIMING OUR LANGUAGE THROUGH EDUCATION

Teaching in Lusoga in primary schools: what change in and out of the classroom?



## Teaching in the local language in primary schools

In late 2006/early 2007, the Cultural Research Centre (CRC), with financial and technical support from the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda, carried out research in Iganga and Namutumba districts to gauge the impact of the introduction of the local language as a medium of instruction in 'pilot' lower primary school classes.

Our research was in response to new circumstances in Uganda's education sector, with Government introducing teaching in local languages in lower primary classes from February 2007. This was accompanied by a "thematic

curriculum," to develop early childhood skills that are fundamental to continuing educational performance in numeracy, literacy and life skills. This was a departure from the earlier emphasis on the acquisition of facts in various subjects in primary schools, mostly focusing on recall, and mostly taught in English.

This nationwide policy followed a pilot initiative in four districts, including Iganga (later split into Iganga and parts of Namutumba districts), where 15 pilot schools had been chosen. Instruction in Lusoga in Primary 1 to 3 classes started there in 2005, following a period



## Summary

This document summarises research carried out by the Cultural Research Centre, with financial and technical support from the Cross Cultural Foundation of Uganda, to investigate changes brought about by the introduction of teaching in Lusoga in pilot primary schools in Iganga district since 2005. We identified positive changes:

i) in the schools, including improved academic performance and pupils reporting more interest in learning. Their behaviour and relationship with teachers has also improved, as they express themselves more freely thanks to their familiarity with the language.

ii) outside the classroom. Parents reported that children, rather than being in their own world with limited knowledge of their language, have been helped to value it. They noticed children's greater readiness to behave "properly", which they related to a better understanding of the local culture imparted at school. Children also share their knowledge with others, thus introducing a beneficial "multiplier effect".

iii) linking language and culture at school and in the community. The beginnings of an attitude shift are noticed in local communities, replacing earlier feelings of negativity on Lusoga and Kisoga culture. There is a strengthened linkage between school and community, as formal education is no longer seen as foreign, with parents and pupils more supportive of schooling generally.

But constraints persist. These include concern about the sustainability of the programme, reflected in some teachers' laissez-faire attitude. Second, many youth are biased against local languages as media of instruction (partly because they are unaware of continued teaching of English), as they say this will undermine academic achievements and the value of school certificates. Third, information available to parents, pupils and community leaders is

limited, as when they label teaching in the local language "teaching for the poor". The absence of a functional District Language Board (DLB) has contributed here, as it has affected lobbying, quality control and evaluation. Finally, there is concern about the interpretation of culture, as when teaching in Lusoga is branded a "minor issue" suitable for women teachers, or when accepting all cultural aspects as desirable, for instance emphasising a subordinate role for girls in the home, because that is "what our culture says".

To address these constraints, we suggest enhancing community sensitisation, making the DLBs operational, ensuring that have better access to teacher training, and quality control through monitoring and evaluation. We also suggest more collaboration among NGOs, CBOs and cultural institutions, as well as further research whose results need to be disseminated to encourage all, including recalcitrant schools and those referring to Lusoga-teaching schools as "third world schools", to review their attitudes. These will demand a concerted effort, so that this very worthwhile initiative has every chance of sustained success.

of teacher training. From the outset however, parents, teachers, pupils and others raised questions: was teaching in the local language possible, and would it make a positive difference to learning?

It is against this background that CRC decided to explore the impact of teaching in Lusoga on pupils both within and outside the classroom, and to identify any challenges arising from this pilot experience. Such interest stemmed from CRC's mission of promoting the Kisoga cultural heritage. Our work has included teacher training, writing a standard Lusoga orthography, grammar and readers, in collaboration with partners such as the Lusoga Language Authority (LULA). We lobbied the Ministry of Education and Sports to have Lusoga recognised as independent from Luganda, and the National Curriculum Development Centre to give technical support and approve our Standard Lusoga Orthography. The choice of Iganga as a pilot district reflected these efforts, as well as the success of our Lusoga translation of the mother-tongue model syllabus, a prime reference text for the programme.

We interviewed 400 pupils, teachers, parents and policy implementers (whose real names are masked where anonymity demands it). We met them in the 15 pilot schools, as well as in 10 non-pilot schools (for comparative purposes), neighbouring communities and the relevant local Government offices. The recent

inception of the programme (two years) makes tracing impact tentative and the reader should therefore consider our conclusions as eye openers that may guide more research, rather than as definitive statements. Nevertheless, we believe that our two-year experience of teaching in Lusoga and its subsequent impact can be useful to policymakers and implementers, to the general public, and to fine-tune this important departure in our country's education system, especially in districts now embarking on this initiative.

## Reclaiming our language

We are familiar with the introduction of English in much of Uganda, through missionaries and colonial officials, with the eventual development of an educational system mostly based on English as medium of instruction and its emergence as the country's official and de facto national language.

In Busoga, using Lusoga as a medium of instruction proved especially challenging because it had historically been marginalised through a double process of colonisation, with the imposition of both English and Luganda. Early missionaries used Buganda as a base to evangelise other parts of the country: they learnt Luganda, used it across the Nile, and enlisted the help of Baganda as aides. Because Lusoga has many similarities with Luganda, they saw no need to learn

### Revitalising Lusoga: A parent's view

"I was happy when I first heard that Lusoga was to be taught in schools because, when the Baganda colonised Busoga, they exerted their influence and language on us and we were falsely made to believe that the Baganda were superior. It is unfortunate to abandon our language, which was also dying away because of comments that some Luganda speakers have made, for example, that Lusoga is dilute Luganda, that Luganda and Lusoga are similar, that there are no books in Lusoga, and worse of all that Lusoga is Luganda but spoken with a poor accent.

But with the teaching of Lusoga in schools, that mentality will change and we shall be able to develop our language. I have started seeing signs of the revival of Lusoga, pupils speak Lusoga correctly and I attribute this to learning in Lusoga. (Moses Lyagoba, a parent in Namungaalwe.)

it and Luganda became the accepted language of evangelisation. Missionaries also established their first schools in Buganda: the sons of Busoga chiefs would thus go to Luganda-medium schools. Upon return, they would pose as well educated and spoke Luganda, even when addressing their subjects. Later, with schools established in Busoga, Luganda remained the language of communication. Colonial officials had also used Baganda agents when establishing their administration in the region. Similarly, Luganda was adopted as the "correct" language for land agreements, religious records, and other documents. Speaking in Lusoga at a public or official event was seen as degrading, even "uncivilised".

Today, Luganda is still widely used in Busoga. The Catholic Church only abandoned it as official medium of evangelisation in 1995, and other churches have yet to do so. On local FM radio call-in shows, many presenters and callers prefer using in Luganda. The mottos of Jinja Municipality and Busoga College Mwiri remain in Luganda. Many of the leaders we interviewed explained how this history created low self-esteem among the Basoga. We therefore had to rediscover ourselves, after long years of "language oppression".

## What positive changes in the classroom?

We found that the introduction of Lusoga (and the thematic curriculum) has led to several positive changes in the classroom:

### i) Academic performance

Our respondents noticed changes, especially in pupils' understanding, reading and writing, result orientation, and retention ability. Several teachers also observed that instruction in Lusoga had eased learning, with improved numeracy skills. All the teachers met said that this could be attributed to learning in a language pupils use to communicate in daily life, rather than having to learn in a foreign language. Being taught in a language they already know, pupils have developed a keen interest, rather than get bored and "switch off".

This results in a changing reading culture. Observations by most of the parents we interviewed with children in pilot schools showed that children take time to read what they come across, such as sign posts and writings on vehicles and buildings. Improved reading and writing performance at school gives the pupils a satisfaction that motivates them to keep on reading. Further, those who attend non-Lusoga teaching schools admire their friends who can read and write better than them, albeit in a local language.

Many teachers in all the pilot schools also reported improved retention skills. One attributed this to the learning aids used to deliver the thematic curriculum. Teachers remarked that this contributes to a happier learning atmosphere in the class — singing, role playing, story telling, and picking word-cards for reading.

## ii) Change in behaviour

The thematic curriculum and its delivery in Lusoga also appear to have led to changes in pupil behaviour. These include improved confidence among pupils, who express themselves in Lusoga without fear, and communicate freely with each other and with their teachers.

Secondly, pupils have been found to be more creative. The production of instructional materials using local materials, such as banana fibre or sisal, has enhanced their creative skills since teachers involve them in their production. It has also given teachers an opportunity to spend more time with them, thus contributing to continuous learning.

Third, most of the teachers met reported “cultural change”: pupils have learnt cultural values, such as ‘proper’ ways of relating with fellow pupils. Quarrelling and fighting have reduced. And many of the teachers interviewed in the piloted schools also said that pupils have learnt ‘proper’ ways of welcoming, greeting and bidding farewell. Teachers also reported increased levels of initiative and voluntarism especially as far as maintaining hygiene and sanitation at school. Such improvements are attributed to the accent on life skills which pupils relate to their immediate environment.



### Learning in Lusoga: pupil's view

“I like being taught in Lusoga. It is interesting because in class we sing, play, and tell stories and riddles. Lusoga is easy! When I go home I can tell my mother what the teacher said in the class. I can write my name and that of my mother and father. I can also read words in the book.” (Salma Namugaya, P.2)

“I like learning in Lusoga because the teacher

tells us to write words in Lusoga which is easy. When I go home, I can write for my father all the words in my book. But I also like to learn English and know how to speak it.” (Susan Nangobi, P.3)

## Teachers' voices in pilot schools

“Nowadays pupils understand what they are taught, unlike earlier when they only crammed things.” (Scholastica Katami, Namutumba School)

“Formerly, a pupil would know an answer but would keep quiet because of difficulty with English and fear of being laughed at. With the use of Lusoga, there is active pupil participation and interest in learning and going to school have increased.” (Tageya Hasifa, Namungaalwe School)

“Behaviour change is taught in this new curriculum. Pupils in pilot schools are better behaved.” (Praxida Katooko, Namungaalwe School)

“With Lusoga, pupils initiate conversations with us at school and even outside. Learning in Lusoga has made us more parental than before and has helped our pupils to love school and feel as comfortable as they feel at home.” (Jane Nakasango, Bukanga School)

## Changes also beyond the classroom...

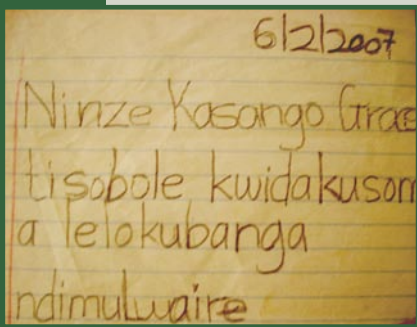
Interestingly, and possibly less expected, teaching in Lusoga has also led to changes outside the classroom:

### i) Children

Many of the parents we met said that children in pilot schools, rather than being in their own world without a good grasp of their language, have now been helped to value their mother tongue. Parents also noticed that children were eager to learn to behave well, which they felt was linked to a better understanding of the local culture imparted at school. Many of the children we met proudly showed us their skills in Lusoga proverb, story and riddle-telling. One group described how this newly-acquired knowledge had given them an enhanced status, not only among their peer, but also in the eyes of their parents and their elders.

In our interactions with children, we also noticed

## Functional writing skills in P.2 class



(Sample letter of a P.2 pupil at Bunhiiro Primary school, explaining to a teacher her inability to attend class because of sickness)

confidence to communicate with outsiders quite freely – a sight previously rarely seen. Secondly, they were in many cases able to relate ideas learnt in class to their immediate environment, as was confirmed by the teachers we interviewed. One example a teacher gave us is the ability to direct visitors in their vicinity, referring to local landmarks. Supplementing this, Mr. Moses Mundu, a parent in Busalaamu, told us that children “are quite self-propelling as far as learning is concerned”. This might explain the reported increased interest among children in listening to Lusoga radio programmes, especially the news, something previously unheard of, according to parents met in group discussions. With this, has come increased awareness of cultural identity and practices. As parents in most of the families we contacted in Luuka County said, children now better know their family roots and lineage. Children were also reported to greet “properly” with the traditionally acceptable words and gestures. This was also noted by older parents in Luuka and Bugweri counties, who also reported that pupils have started practicing income generating activities like rope and broom making to buy books and to generally make themselves more useful in the home and community.

### ii) Other children, family and community

Here again, several positive changes were noticed. So far as other children are concerned, a “multiplier effect” is at work: when at home, children turn themselves into teachers for their siblings and their neighbours’ children. Many parents (with children in piloted schools) we met for instance said that their children now spend much time practicing writing on the ground in their compounds and challenge each other on what they have learnt at school.

So far as parents are concerned, many said they support their children, where possible, with homework and provide them with scholastic materials to help them

improve their performance and not to miss lessons. Teachers also observed a more positive parental attitude towards their children’s education. There is also enhanced learning from the children themselves: several parents for instance stated that they had learnt stories, proverbs, forgotten vocabulary and improved orthography from their children. As they develop interest in their children’s education, parents not only emphasise sending their children to school, but also no longer view formal education as alien because of the English medium previously used, in spite of many being either illiterate or semi-literate.

So far as the community at large is concerned, a positive change of attitude is also emerging. This is because,



## Changes in the community

“Children in this area now compete in spelling each other’s names and counting numbers, which was rare before they started learning in Lusoga.” (Damian Mulumba, parent)

“I am so happy that our children are learning in our indigenous language. My two children in P.2 and P.3 now volunteer to tell me what they have learnt, and this has made me interested in revising with them.” (Martin Kaigo, parent)

“Earlier, some parents in this village had withdrawn their children from Lusoga schools thinking that their children would not learn properly. Some parents then brought them back because of the striking changes they saw in our children back at home. They read, they write properly, and their behaviour has changed.” (Jessica Nangobi, teacher at Busalaamu School)

“Previously, one could send a child to school for two terms without a book, pencil or pen. These days, parents have developed a positive attitude towards their children’s learning. The numbers of pupils without books and pencils have reduced.” (Two teachers at Namutumba school)

“Our grand children are fast becoming aware of our traditional values which had for long been ignored among the youth.” (Grand-parents in Namungaalwe)

■ according to elders, children have been noticed to exhibit pride in their language and share knowledge acquired at school, as when they share riddles and proverbs with their peers or when undertaking culturally-linked tasks (weaving, rope-making), to the benefit of the homes of pupils attending the pilot schools, something which impressed the older generation. Older men and women we met said they listen to stories as told by their grand children, a new development since instruction in Lusoga was introduced. Increased knowledge of Kisoga cultural values and practices by pupils, according to these elders, is bridging the generation gap that has existed for decades between the young and the old.

### iii) First traces of impact

These changes appear to have led to “ripple effects”, including an increased appreciation of Kisoga culture, with enhanced self-esteem in the community. For children, there is increased appreciation of the local language, as when those in lower classes start to challenge those in upper classes who speak Luganda by asking: “Are you a Musoga? Why don’t you speak Lusoga?”

Improved self-esteem has in turn led to improved social relationships and information flows, as when a child is asked to write a letter passing on the news of the loss of a relative, or to inform teachers that she is unable to attend class.

This in turn has changed the community perception of education, with parents now able to “connect” with their children’s education, whereas the English medium would set them apart, if they had not attended school themselves. Parents then become more willing to send their children to school and support the use of Lusoga.

Amongst the older generation, especially, the school was seen as a foreign concept and a destination for troublesome children. Now, the links between the community and the school and between the younger and the older generation are closing. With an enhanced perception of education as not being anti-culture, but an instrument for increased cultural pride, the old and young generations are laying a strong foundation that will lead to reclaiming their language through education.

## But challenges persist...

In spite of these positive changes, fears and uncertainties about Lusoga as a medium of instruction persist:

### i) Uncertainties at school

One constraint stems from inadequate preparation, including the process of developing the curriculum, availing resource materials and availing sufficient infrastructure for the programme. Teachers in all the schools we visited also stated that they were insufficiently reassured by the Ministry of Education about Government’s continued commitment to the programme. Although functional District Language Boards (DLBs) are necessary to manage local languages as media of instruction, no prior arrangements had been made in Iganga to facilitate the DLB and make it operational. This made lobbying for funds, vetting, and quality control of instruction materials slow and difficult. Prior collaboration and networking between the Ministry of Education and organisations involved in related work, such as the Kyabazingaship (Busoga monarchy), CRC and LULA were also deficient during crucial preparatory stages of the programme.

Another problem concerns teacher training and motivation. Teacher training in preparation for the pilot was insufficient, a problem also experienced during the nationwide introduction of the programme. In Iganga, some teachers expressed a negative attitude toward the thematic curriculum, which they found “strange to us”. When training time came, only three teachers were selected from each Government-aided school, and one per private school. This turned out to be inadequate and private schools, in particular, expressed their inability to implement the new policy. In addition, some non-Basoga teachers found the language difficult and foreign: they needed more training time. Teachers handling this curriculum also expected rewards to accompany what they considered a ‘special’ programme. Finally, teachers have been stereotyped in some schools: those handling the programme have been branded “vernacular teachers”, thus fostering low self-esteem. Further, since female teachers work in lower primary in many schools, this is seen by some male chauvinists as a feminine issue.

Availability and quality of materials also proved a problem and teachers started improvising readers and charts in their respective schools. This was a positive initiative but it led to diverse resource materials, leaving pupils confused. This arose because both the thematic curriculum and the teacher’s guide are still in English. Some of the materials also contain grammatical and orthographical errors, a problem that can be traced to an inactive DLB, as it is supposed to vet production of materials at the district level.

### ii) Outside the school

Given the historical background given above, communities, parents and teachers have been sceptical



## Insufficient resources: a teacher's voice

"Teacher training was poorly organized. Only a few teachers were trained and even for these, the training was inadequate to effectively handle this programme. This was insufficient, as was the seven-day induction workshop, given the contents of the thematic curriculum coupled with a new language. Currently, we are supposed to have continuous training twice a month at the different zones but this is not happening. We are told there are no funds as yet.

"The materials available are also insufficient and besides, some publishers are making Lusoga materials that are not relevant to us. Some materials are still in English and poorly translated into Lusoga by the teachers. We have not been involved in the vetting the materials. I have almost failed to translate the scheming and lesson planning from English to Lusoga. This, and other challenges, have led some of my fellow teachers to develop a negative attitude towards the programme and some have even refused to use Lusoga in lower primary." (Faridah Namusobya, Namungalwe School)

about the relevance of Lusoga in education. The youth in particular consider it "a primitive and difficult language." In many of the villages and communities visited, we were told that learning in Lusoga would not expose children to the competitive global world of technology and professional jobs. Thus, contrary to the view held by many older parents that learning in Lusoga has revived certain values and practices, other parents questioned its relevance. For them, learning English is most important. As one parent commented: "I cannot pay school fees for my child to learn Lusoga. When a child speaks good English after school I feel proud and I consider that as the value of the school fees I paid". Non-Lusoga teaching schools then acquire the aura of being "best" – especially for educated and rich families, whereas Lusoga is seen as suitable for poor rural schools. Local leaders in most of the communities visited also proved divided on the issue of learning in Lusoga. The opponents were "de-campaigning" the programme as a mere Government

"ploy to kill the education system in the country," as one of them said. Such assertions mislead some sections of the public and raise anxieties, especially among rural people who do not have access to accurate information.



## Children's conflicting opinions in Bukyega village

Bukyega village in Luuka has pilot and non-pilot schools. We were told that pupils had engaged in heated debates as to which are preferable and met a group of 30 children, aged 7-12.

Although hardly any of them could respond correctly to a greeting in English, most appreciated learning English. Many looked up to English speakers because, as they said: "People can admire you when you speak it – you can be unique."

Nevertheless, those who went to Lusoga schools said they liked learning in Lusoga because it is easy: before, they did not understand what the teacher used to teach, with the risk of the teacher getting annoyed and beating them.

However, one pupil, despite his love for Lusoga expressed his difficulty; "I am a Musoga, I love Lusoga but it is difficult to pronounce and spell certain words". Some of the children said that their love for Lusoga came from their parents' influence but, if given the opportunity, they would have chosen English as well.

While they acknowledged that it is difficult to understand what the teacher says in English, many said they preferred being taught in English because they wanted to learn to speak it. They explained that they already knew Lusoga so did not admire learning it. The majority we met said they had no regrets for not being instructed in Lusoga. One boy said: "We come to school to learn English.... how can you learn English in Lusoga?" Another said: "I know Lusoga so I want to know English also." And a P.5 pupil added: "But Lusoga... it is only good for speaking... can you write a love letter to your girlfriend?... she can just laugh at you."

Some of these negative attitudes thus stem from insufficient “sensitisation” about the programme. In our interaction with communities, we found that most of the parents, pupils and teachers we met had heard about teaching in Lusoga in the form of rumours from friends and neighbours. The Education Office disseminated information through teachers, Parent/teacher associations, parents and pupils in their respective schools, but this was not always clear, as shown by the continued confusion as to whether the programme involved learning in Lusoga or learning Lusoga as a language. Little or no information leads to speculation, sometimes taken to extremes, as in the case of a resident we interviewed who thought that by introducing Lusoga in primary schools, the Government plans to dwarf the intellect of its citizens! More importantly, there is confusion among parents who think that by using Lusoga, English has been completely removed from the curriculum, ignorant of the fact that English is taught as a subject under the thematic curriculum.

Other hesitations concern the interpretation of culture. Teaching in Lusoga has been branded an activity for women teachers, a perception we found among many of the teachers we met. From a Kisoga cultural perspective, women can be considered less competent than men in “the professions”. There is also tendency of accepting all aspects of the local culture as being unquestionable and, by implication, desirable, as when emphasising a subordinate role for girls in the home, legitimised because that is “what our culture says”.

## What next?

Unless such fears and constraints are addressed, this programme is unlikely to progress as it should. We suggest that the following be looked into:

### i) Community sensitisation

Government should better inform the public (using radio stations, for instance) on the objectives and benefits of the programme. The position of English in the new curriculum needs to be explained, as well as any notion that Lusoga will delay the acquisition of good English skills.

### ii) Resourcing for schools

The viability of the programme will ultimately rely on its quality: sufficient numbers of teachers need to be trained,

good quality materials developed and made available, and efforts to improve the school infrastructure continued (including decentralised production and procurement of learning materials). To some extent, this intervention should be extended to private schools as well.

### iii) Functional District Language Board

DLBs are essential quality controller in the provision of local language instruction. These should be strengthened to avoid, for instance, discrepancies in orthography and grammar that can undermine confidence in the programme. The Board require adequate funding and monitoring of its activities by the Ministry.

### iv) Networking and collaboration

The District Education Office, and in particular the Inspectorate, need to collaborate more with other institutions, community-based organisations and others, such as CRC, LULA, and the Lusoga Language Development Association may also help in training teachers and in advocacy issues. Similarly, the Ministry of Education needs to cooperate with the Ministries for Education and Culture in the Kyabazingaship of Busoga and assist in initiatives that will boost the Government’s efforts. This could include a programme on the local FM stations about the cultural benefits of education in the local language and encouragement for the development of Lusoga reading and writing materials.

### v) Further research

Research, in collaboration with all concerned, is needed on two main fronts: one, to determine the sustainability of the programme and what it will take to keep in going. Two, to learn from similar experiences in primary schools in other districts implementing the programme.

### vi) Monitoring and evaluation

District education officials need to be encouraged and facilitated to monitor the programme on a regular basis. Results must be disseminated to encourage all, including recalcitrant schools and those referring to Lusoga-teaching schools as “third world schools” to review their attitudes.

Addressing these issues demands a concerted effort by all stakeholders, especially the cultural institutions, NGOs, CBOs, the donor community, and well-wishers to join hands with Government, so that this very worthwhile initiative has every chance of sustained success.

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