

Challenges of Mother Tongue Education in Primary Schools in Western Rural District, Sierra Leone

SAHR JIMISSA¹, FATMATA GLORIA RHIDA²,

^{1,2}*Milton Margai Technical University, Goderich Campus, Freetown, Sierra Leone*

ABSTRACT: This study was undertaken to examine the challenges of L1 education in the Western Rural District of Sierra Leone. The study was undertaken because of the concerns regarding the low level of effective implementation of the L1 education policy, despite the evidence that L1 instruction enhances learners' understanding and academic achievement. The study started with an introduction, background of the study, statement of the problem, aim and objectives, research questions, and significance of the study. The literature review examined the theoretical and empirical studies on L1 education and language policy. The review highlighted different perspectives on the importance of using the learners' L1 in enhancing learning outcomes. A mixed-method research design was employed, and the data was collected using questionnaires administered to teachers, head teachers, and facilitators. The quantitative data were analyzed using frequencies and percentages, while the qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that the major challenges facing L1 education include parental preference for English Language instruction, lack of qualified teachers, inadequate teaching and learning materials, and the poor implementation of the language policy. Despite these challenges, the research found prospects for L1 education, which enhances easy comprehension and classroom participation. To achieve the objectives of the L1 education policy, the following recommendations were made: increase teacher training in L1 pedagogy, provide appropriate teaching and learning materials, ensure strong policy implementation, and community sensitization programmes.

Keywords: Mother tongue, language policy, second Language, implementation.

I. Background to the Study

The educational system of Sierra Leone up to independence in 1961 was modelled mainly on that of England. After independence, some policy adjustments were made, notably the White Paper Policy (1970) and the New Education Policy for Sierra Leone (1995). The system inherited from the British colonial Masters laid emphasis on liberal education, leading to conservative professions such as law, medicine, and teaching. The education system was geared mainly towards producing an elite group who could serve in the civil service. This education system never made provision for learners who could not prove their intellectual abilities. Such learners with practical gifts or abilities were regarded as failures or dropouts. This system failed to recognize the problems of a developing country or a poor nation pulled apart by different languages, tribal affiliations, and cultures. Some people believed that this system failed to nurture proud, creative, efficient, and self-assured native Sierra Leoneans.

The search for an educational system that makes provision for both the intellectual and practical abilities of the learner and is of benefit to both the state and the individual led to the introduction of the 6-3-3-4 system of education in 1995. This system caters for the economic, cultural and civic needs of the country and emphasizes the acquisition of agricultural, technical and scientific skills. The teaching of the Sierra Leonean Languages was introduced as core subjects.

In the *New Educational Policy for Sierra Leone (1995) (Section B. 5.5)*, provision was made for the teaching of indigenous languages throughout the school system, teacher training colleges and the universities. The policy recommended using four Sierra Leonean languages – Mende, Krio, Limba and Themne as medium of instruction in the lower primary classes. They were to be taught as subjects of study from the upper primary school, Junior Secondary (JSS), Senior Secondary School (SSS) and at tertiary levels. A National Institute of Sierra Leonean Languages was established to promote the development and the use of these languages both within the educational system and the community at large.

Taking a critical observation of what this policy recommends on Mother Tongue Education, there are bound to be obstacles this approach will face. The average Sierra Leonean is of the view that to be literate means having the ability to read and write in English or French, as the case may be. Therefore, although these policies are documented as language policies of Sierra Leone, none of these languages are used as the language of instruction in the early grade levels; rather, they are taught as subjects. Also, another constraint the Mother Tongue Education policy faces is in a multilingual environment like Sierra Leone, where the language of instruction might be different from what the child speaks as his/her L1.

The promotion of Mother Tongue Education should be regarded as very important, as language is the product and replica of man. Therefore, the development of one's Mother Tongue for education is also the development of one's culture and self. In the Sierra Leonean context, this has long been ignored because of the biased perception that our languages are inferior. This is justified in Sierra Leone by regarding one as more literate if that person can speak and write the English Language or some other European languages perfectly.

Sierra Leone, like Ghana, has Mother Tongue Education policies that are similar. The current language policy of Ghana mandates the use of the child's L1 or the dominant language of the region as the Language of instruction from kindergarten to primary 3. English is taught as a subject in the lower grades. In the upper primary, from grade 4 up to tertiary level, the L1 is taught as a subject. The policy states:

Where teachers and learning materials are available, and the linguistic composition of the class is uniform, the children's first language must be used as a dominant medium of instruction in the kindergarten and the lower primary school. Ministry of Education, Ghana (2004, pp 27-28)

Taking a careful look at the percentage literacy rates of Sierra Leone 48.3% (UNESCO, 2022), Liberia 48.2% (UNESCO, 2022), and Ghana 80.4% (www.microtrend, 2020). These statistics show that Sierra Leone is not doing well in terms of acquiring literacy. The Sierra Leone National Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Assessment Baseline Survey of 2021 showed that (64–73%) of the learners from grades 2 to 4 could not comprehend the text they read. Should we attribute the low literacy rate in Sierra Leone to these reasons?

- a. The L1 education Policy of Sierra Leone made provision for the teaching of only four dominant languages – Mende, Krio, Limba and Temne. No provisions were made for the teaching of the other 12 languages.
- b. The lack of personnel and materials to teach these languages is also a setback.
- c. Most Sierra Leoneans regard the indigenous languages to be inferior compared to English and French.

- d. In Sierra Leone, the trained teachers in primary school are estimated to be around 63.06% UNESCO (2020). Whereas in Ghana, it is estimated to be around 67.3% (UNESCO, 2020), and in Liberia, the percentage is estimated to be around 62.32% UNESCO (2022)

Reflecting on the educational history of Sierra Leone, in 1804, the Church Missionary Society of England sent the first batch of missionaries to build churches and schools. By 1824, schools were built in the colony. Fourah Bay College was established in 1827 to train missionaries and teachers. It became the first university in Africa. In 1845, the Christian Missionary Society founded the Grammar School, which was the first boys' school in West Africa. In 1849, the Annie Walsh Memorial School for girls, the first girls' Secondary school in West Africa, was founded. It was for these successes scored in education and in the field of administration that Sierra Leone was referred to as the Athens of West Africa. The question often asked by Sierra Leoneans is: where did we go wrong with such a low Literacy rate recorded in recent times? This research is an investigation geared towards: "the Challenges of Mother Tongue Education (L1) in Primary Schools in Western Rural District, Sierra Leone".

II. Statement of Problem

In the early years of a child's cognitive and academic development, language plays a significant role. Research shows that children learn faster and better when the medium of instruction is in their L1. In a multilingual context like Sierra Leone, L1 education provides a smooth transition from the L1 to the targeted language (UNESCO 2016, World Bank, 2021). Despite these advantages, little has been achieved in L1 education in Sierra Leone, particularly in the Western Rural District.

National and regional literacy assessments show low literacy levels among primary school pupils in Sierra Leone, particularly in rural communities (World Bank, 2021). These setbacks show that teachers are not effectively using the L1 as a medium of instruction, simply because they lack training in L1 pedagogy. Those who first attempted to collect materials in Sierra Leonean Languages, were mainly missionaries, explorers, and traders. They had little or no expertise in linguistic description or orthography of these languages. Therefore, when confronted with a range of puzzling sounds, the English sound system and system of writing provided answers, often not the correct answers. This rendered research work in these languages difficult.

It has also been observed that the high rate of illiteracy is a setback to the national development of a country; this seems to be the situation in Sierra Leone and other African countries. To remedy this situation, many African countries are advocating for an increase in the literacy percentage rate of their respective countries. Although, to some extent, they have succeeded in increasing access to learning institutions by building schools, this does not reflect the child's ability to read and write fluently. Urgent measures must be put in place to achieve the Millennium Development Goal 2(MDG2) 'Achieve universal primary education 2015'. Much has been achieved by Western countries, when compared to their African counterparts.

Research has shown that children learn better in their L1, as compared to learning in foreign languages like French and English (UNESCO, 2022). Further emphasis was made that the children's L1 is the most desirable language for literacy and learning throughout primary school. Ghana, to some extent, has made considerable gains with an 80.4% literacy rate (UNESCO, 2020), as compared to Sierra Leone with a 48.7% literacy rate (UNESCO 2022).

It has been observed that countries with high illiteracy rates experience challenges in terms of their political and national development. This seems to be the situation in Sierra Leone. Strategies must be put in place to reduce the country's illiteracy rate. One of the best ways to do that is to give children the opportunity to become literate or to use the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in early grade education. This was the objective behind the introduction of the Mother Tongue Education Policy.

This study therefore seeks to address the gap between the policy recommendations of L1 education and the practical realities of its implementation in Western Rural District, Sierra Leone. We are evaluating the challenges faced in the implementation of L1 education and exploring the prospects it offers in improving literacy outcomes.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to assess the challenges in the implementation of Mother Tongue Education in the Western Rural District of Sierra Leone.

Objectives

The specific objectives of the study include the following:

- i. To identify the challenges encountered in the implementation of Mother Tongue Education in the Western Rural District.
- ii. To make recommendations on how these challenges can be addressed for the smooth implementation of Mother Tongue Education in Western Rural.

Research Questions

- What are the challenges encountered in the implementation of Mother Tongue Education in the primary schools in Western Rural District?
- What recommendations will you make to address the challenges encountered in the implementation of Mother Tongue Education in Western Rural District?

III. Significance of the Study

Mother tongue education plays an important role in the development of every nation. It is therefore important that education at the early grade levels should be carried out in the learner's L1. Research has shown that L1 education, by all standards, is best suited to enhance reading skills in the initial stages of primary school. UNESCO (1983, pp. 47-8) asserted that 'Every effort should be made to provide education in the mother tongue'. They further opined that the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction is a means through which the quality of learning is improved. This work therefore will be of benefit to teachers and curriculum planners.

Although there is a global call for the implementation of mother tongue education, the process is faced with a series of challenges and problems. The shortage of professionally trained teachers, unavailability of teaching and learning materials, and the attitude of parents and learners towards mother tongue education are some of the challenges to be faced. They are of the view that literacy could be attained through the dominant world languages like English or French. This research work will provide an insight into the problems teachers, pupils, and administrators encounter with the implementation of the mother tongue education policy and proffer solutions.

Despite improvements in access to learning institutions in most African countries, literacy levels in the early grades remain very low, and progress has been very slow. University Research Co. (2019) suggests that the mismatch between the language of instruction and the L1 of the pupils can distort effective teaching and learning. It is therefore necessary that the language policies adopted should fit into the Linguistic context of the country. This will enhance and improve learning outcomes. In Sierra Leone, although the language policy prescribes the teaching of the L1 during the first three years of early grade, quite sincerely, this is not what obtains in the classroom situation. The lack of teaching and learning materials is an impediment to the use of L1 as a medium of instruction. It is our hope that this research will immensely contribute towards providing insight into the importance of the Mother Tongue Education Policy. Research shows that children learn to read and write effectively when the medium of instruction is their L1. This work will strengthen and contribute immensely to L1 education and help the children to

smoothly transition to English, which is the official language of Sierra Leone (UNESCO, 2016; Benson, 2017).

This research will be useful not only to the community but also in helping preserve learners' culture. Both the children and their parents are encouraged to value their L1 as an important tool of learning, which also helps to preserve their cultural identity (Heugh, 2020). This work will help researchers who intend to undertake studies in the field of mother tongue education and how it can be implemented. In this research work, we are finding out the challenges of mother tongue education in the Western Rural District. It is hoped that a study will be conducted in the lower grades' classes of primary schools in the Western Rural District. This will subsequently lead us to finding solutions to the issues raised as objectives of the study.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Sierra Leone is a multilingual country with numerous indigenous languages spoken within the country, with English as the official language. Literacy plays a significant role in the development of every nation. It is therefore important that attention be given to mother tongue education at the early grade levels of the learner. It was for this that Article 9.3 of the Sierra Leone Constitution made provision for the teaching of the indigenous languages. Also, the 2004 Educational Act introduced L1 education in our curriculum.

UNESCO (2003) defines L1 education as: "Education that begins in the learner's mother tongue, using it as the principal medium of instruction in the early years, while gradually introducing additional languages." Research shows that children learn better in their L1, as compared to learning in foreign languages like French or English. UNESCO (2008a) affirms that children's L1 is the most desirable language for literacy and learning throughout primary school. Sierra Leone has a literacy rate of 48.6% (Micro Trends, 2022), and Ghana has a literacy rate of 80.3% (UNESCO, 2020). These two literacy percentages show that Sierra Leone has a very low literacy rate compared to Ghana. Also, the Sierra Leone National Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Assessment Baseline Survey of 2021 shows that (64 -73%) of the learners from grades 2-4 could not comprehend the text they read. This research, therefore, is an assessment of the challenges of mother tongue education in Sierra Leone: a case study of the primary schools in Western Rural District.

Linguistic Interdependence Theory in L1 Education

The Linguistic Interdependence Theory in L1 education was first developed by Jim Cummins in 1979. This theory suggests that L1 plays a vital role in the learning of the target language L2. It further argues that the skills, knowledge, and comprehension abilities acquired from the L1 can be useful in the learning of the L2. The theory's hypotheses state that linguistic competency in one language may be transferred to another, and greater levels of competency lead to greater levels of transfer (Rose Clayton, 2024, p.2).

This theory places a premium on the use of L1 as a medium of instruction in the early grades of learners. Many studies show that proficiency or high levels of literacy in L1 lead to easy learning of L2. (de Galbert (2023) and Kim and Piper (2019) demonstrated the importance of the linguistic interdependence hypothesis in the African context. They observed that learning the L1 at the early grade levels will result in an increase in performance in learning L2 at the upper grade levels. From Jim Cummins's perspective, there is a common underlying proficiency. In this situation, abilities such as reading comprehension, critical thinking, and problem-solving learned in the L1 can help them to read and understand texts in English. The core idea is that the skills learned in one language can be transferred in the learning of another language. Also, a strong foundation in the first language helps achieve academic success in the second language. In the Sierra Leone context, which is multilingual, this theory has important implications for L1 policy and classroom practice.

- Using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction helps the children to better understand the concept taught.
- L1 supports learners to easily learn the L2. Pupils who develop literacy in their L1 often learn the L2 faster.
- When the learning of the L1 is suppressed, it hinders the learning process. In countries that ignore L1 education, learners struggle academically.

The relevance of the Linguistic Interdependence Theory to L1 education is that it supports mother tongue-based education in the early grades. This explains why many African countries are encouraging L1 education at the early grade before transitioning to the target language. This theory is also used to justify why countries are adopting L1 education at the early stages of learning.

What are the Challenges Encountered in the Implementation of L1 Education in Primary Schools?

The constitution of Sierra Leone supports the learning of L1 as an educational right of a citizen. This gives the legal right for the inclusion of the child's first language within the educational system. (1991 constitution, amended in 2008). The New Educational Policy for Sierra Leone on L1 education emphasized the importance of acquiring learning in the child's L1. It asserts that: "The high rate of illiteracy is a setback to national development in our country. Therefore, strategies must be put in place to eradicate illiteracy. One of the best ways of doing so is to give citizens the opportunity to be literate in their L1 or the community languages of their region. Also, there are social, psychological, and pedagogical benefits that will be derived through literacy in L1 and the community languages. Educational Acts (2004).

In recognition of this new policy, the government mandated the use of the national languages as a medium of communication. The 6-3-3-4 system of education made provisions for the use of L1, or the dominant language, as a medium of instruction in the lower primary. For the Junior and Senior Secondary Schools' levels, the predominant community language should be taught as a subject. At the tertiary level, one indigenous language shall be taught as a core subject in the first year.

Just like in Sierra Leone, Ghana's language policy mandates the use of the child's L1 or the dominant language of the region as the language of instruction from kindergarten to grade 3. English is taught as a subject in the lower grades. In the upper primary from grade 4 to tertiary levels, Ghanaian languages are taught as subjects. The policy states: "Where the teaching and learning materials are available, and the linguistic composition of the class is uniform, the children's first language must be used as a medium of instruction in the kindergarten and the lower primary school." Ministry of Education Ghana (2004, pp 27-28).

Although both policies are enthusiastic about the use of the child's L1 as a medium of instruction in early grade education. There will also be the problem of getting learning materials. The Ghanaian Government, however, has made considerable effort, more than their Sierra Leonean counterparts, in providing learning materials in eleven of the national languages to support the implementation of the mother tongue education policy. These materials are only available for the teaching of literacy and language classes and not for other subjects like Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, etc. Teachers in lower-grade classes are expected to translate these subjects or textbooks from English into the learners' L1. Ministry of Education Ghana (2012 p11). It is not mandatory in Sierra Leone to translate subjects into the child's mother tongue that are in English.

UNESCO (2003 b, pp 47-8) supports that L1 education is an easy means of improving the quality of education. All the countries involved in promoting L1 education agree that it is the best way of helping learners to acquire learning. It has also been identified that L1 policies that identify and prescribe a few languages as national

languages tend to marginalize particularly ethnic minority languages. They therefore call for the development of intercultural and bilingual education to improve access to learning UNESCO (2010). This seems to be the exact situation in Sierra Leone, where only four languages are selected as national languages of the country. Nothing was mentioned about the situation of the other languages in the policy.

Kamanda (2022) identified the following as challenges faced in implementing L1 education in Sierra Leone:

- Historical legacy and the attitude of the people towards local languages used as a medium of instruction are a challenge. Sierra Leone inherited a Western type of education from Britain. Our institutions, structures and programmes were modelled after their educational patterns. These structures provided a negative attitude towards L1 education as instructional media. English also remained the official language and is often associated with educational success. This weakened support for L1 education among policymakers, teachers, and parents. To address these challenges, a lot of sensitization and education are required to change their perception about L1 education.
- He also observed that, although the implementation of L1 education in Sierra Leone has policy support, A new Educational Policy (1995), practical implementation lagged due to:
 - i. Lack of adequate materials in local languages
 - ii. Teachers' preparation gap. Not enough teachers have been trained to implement the programme. The estimated trained teachers in primary schools is 69.8% (Trading Economics, 2024). Whereas the estimated trained teachers for The Gambia is 89% (World Bank Group, 2024).
 - iii. Most institutions in Sierra Leone favour the use of English rather than the use of L1 as a medium of instruction.

These could be attributed to the reasons why L1 education in Sierra Leone is on a low scale when compared to its West African counterparts. Kenya is also advocating for the use of L1 from kindergarten to the lower grades of the primary schools. UNESCO (2022) estimated Kenya's literacy rate to be 82.8%. Despite this high literacy percentage rate, when compared to Sierra Leone and other African countries, Kenya also faces numerous challenges in implementing the L1 education policy.

Rehema A. (2024) observed that although Kenya's language education policy advocates for L1 education in pre-primary and the lower grades, implementation has been challenging. One of the challenges is that educational stakeholders do not fully understand the pedagogical advantages of teachers and pupils learning in the L1. Most parents are of the view that literacy in foreign languages like English and French is the most suitable language for acquiring literacy. Cummins (2000) states that children whose educational foundations have been built on their L1 could develop a solid literacy ability and can easily transfer their knowledge and skills across languages.

He further discovered that although considerable effort has been made to develop learning materials for the children's L1 education, these materials are conspicuously absent in the classrooms. Instead, the teachers prefer using the textbooks in English. In the Sierra Leone context, learning materials in the children's L1 are difficult to come by. Rehema, in his research, further discovered that there is a mismatch between the policy and the pattern of implementation. Teachers find it difficult to transition from L1 to the targeted language, which in this case is English. Policymakers need to evaluate the process to enhance a smooth transition from the children's L1 to English.

The Gambia is currently engaged in a shift from English as a medium of instruction in the lower grades to L1 as an instructional medium. This shift highlighted opportunities that L1 education stands to benefit the individual and the community at large. Such benefits offer pedagogical, cultural, and developmental benefits. Despite these benefits, there are obstacles that L1 education faces. These include limited resources, teacher training gaps, and

ideological resistance. Teach Educator (2025). In the Gambia, just like in other African countries, the child's L1, which includes the following languages – Mandinka, Wolof, Fula or Soninke- is used in most cases as a medium of instruction. In the upper primary classes, English is introduced as a medium of instruction for some subjects. The L1 continued to be used to strengthen the learner's literacy skills. For junior and senior secondary schools and tertiary institutions, English is used as a medium of instruction, and one L1 as a subject.

Trudell (2025) identified two issues which must have influenced education stakeholders in the Gambia to introduce L1 education:

- The low rate of performance of Gambian students in local and public exams can be attributed to the language of instruction. With English as the medium of instruction, the learner's ability to comprehend concepts and issues is challenging. Research also shows that children learn better in their L1, as compared to learning in foreign languages like English and French (UNESCO, 2008a). Also, the literacy rate in The Gambia is a bit low when compared to other African countries. 58.7 % Microtrend (2022).
- There is also a strong conviction that the heavy focus on English as a medium of instruction in the schools is hindering the maintenance of a strong national identity among the Gambian citizens.

These two problems negatively influence the implementation of the L1 education policy in the Gambia. To address these issues, the seven national languages should be used as a medium of instruction in the lower primary schools throughout the country. Trudell (2024) observed that the choice of languages for inclusion in L1 education could be a problem. Not all the seven national languages are appropriate to be used as a medium of instruction. The number of native speakers and how vast they are will be a setback. Three languages are usually proposed: Mandinka, Fula, and Wolof. These languages are spoken as first or second languages among most Gambians. Policy planners suggest that starting with these will help reduce material costs, reducing to some extent the acute shortage of trained teachers to teach these languages.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In every research, there are sets of objectives or hypotheses that the researcher hopes to achieve by the end of his investigation. Achieving these objectives will depend on the methodology. This work is a study on the challenges of L1 education in Sierra Leone, a case study of primary schools in Western Rural District. A descriptive survey design will be adopted using a mixed-method approach to assess the challenges of L1 education in Sierra Leone, with specific reference to Western Rural District.

Orodho (2003) highlighted that a descriptive survey methodology is used to describe existing conditions, attitudes, opinions, or characteristics of a population without manipulating the variables. Creswell (2014) agrees with Orodho and further stresses that this design is advantageous because it enables researchers to collect data from a representative sample and generalize findings to a wider population. We considered the descriptive survey design appropriate for this work because it provides a means for a systematic description and evaluation of the challenges the current L1 education implementation faces and its benefits.

This work also uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to reach the objectives of the research. This mixed method considerably helps to get a complete rather than a standalone quantitative or qualitative study result. The data collected will be analyzed using a mixed-methods approach, which combines elements of quantitative and qualitative research to achieve the objectives of the research. This method helps considerably to get a complete understanding of the result rather than a standalone quantitative or qualitative result. UNESCO (2020) asserts that combining data sources improves validity in educational research. The rationale for using the mixed-method design for this work is as follows:

- i. Mother tongue involves implementing policy and using the right pedagogy. It also involves studying the social attitude of the community. The mixed-method approach will be appropriate for such studies.
- ii. Challenges include both measurable and perception-based issues; therefore, the mixed-method approach is suitable for such work.

Tyler Dye (2022) defines qualitative data analysis as “A process of gathering, structuring and interpreting qualitative data to understand what it represents”. To test the hypothesis of this research, a content analysis will be carried out. This will help to identify the patterns that emerge from the data. Klaus Krippendorff (2018) defines content analysis as: “A research technique for making replicable and valid references from text to context of their use”. This simply means studying the information in a structured way to understand the meaning and patterns. In achieving the objectives of this research work, research questions were formulated. These questions will help us to achieve a satisfactory interpretation of the data and subsequently meet the objectives of this work.

On the other hand, the quantitative analysis involves a technique by which the analyst relies on mathematical and statistical figures and models to reach the objectives set. True Tamplin (2022). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 17) define mixed-method research as: “Mixing or combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, concepts or language into a single study”. In analyzing the quantitative data, the researcher will use the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS). For the qualitative data, the researcher will conduct the analysis using a descriptive procedure. From the analysis highlighted above, the data will be summarized, conclusions drawn, and recommendations made.

Study Area and Setting

The Western Rural District is one of the administrative districts of Sierra Leone, and this research work will be carried out in this district. It occupies most of the rural parts of the Freetown peninsula and surrounds the city of Freetown. It lies in the western part of Sierra Leone and forms part of the Freetown metropolitan area. The area is bounded by the Western Urban District of Freetown, to the north by Port Loko District, and to the south/east by the Atlantic Ocean.

Population and Sample Size

According to the 2015 population and housing census, it has a population of about 442,951, and in the 2021 census, there was a rapid population growth of over 662,000 inhabitants. This rapid population growth is because of urbanization from the nearby Freetown area. The Western Rural District is ethnically diverse in Sierra Leone. It comprises the following ethnic groups:

- Krio
- Sherbro
- Temne
- Limba and other ethnic groups.

Since the focus of this study is to identify the problems of L1 education, a simple random sampling will be carried out to ensure fairness and equal representation of participants in the study. The sample size for this study will consist of ten schools, selected within the Western Rural District of Sierra Leone.

Questionnaires will be administered to Head Teachers and teachers of P1- P3 classes within the Western Rural District. The use of questionnaires will enable us to collect reliable data within a short period of time. The findings

obtained from the sampled institutions will be used to make generalizations about L1 education in the Western Rural District.

Sources of Data

For this work, we are utilizing primary sources of data to collect information on L1 in the Western Rural District of Sierra Leone. The data will be obtained directly from respondents using questionnaires and classroom observation checklists. The questionnaires will be administered to heads of schools and P1– P3 teachers to collect information on the challenges of L1 education in the Western Rural District. These questionnaires will help us considerably to obtain the correspondents' views, experiences, and challenges faced in the implementation of L1 education. Also, the classroom observation checklists will be used to observe the use of the L1, class participation and the moderation of the class during lessons. These instruments will help us ensure that accurate and reliable data are collected for the study.

Data Collection Procedure

The data will be collected in Sierra Leone, Western Rural District. Questionnaires will be administered to ten schools in the targeted district. Questionnaires will be given to heads of school and teachers. The questionnaires will capture the following areas:

- ✓ Personal data
- ✓ Availability of teaching and learning materials
- ✓ Qualifications of head teachers, teachers and facilitators
- ✓ Successes achieved in implementing mother-tongue education
- ✓ Obstacles encountered during the implementation
- ✓ Focus group discussions using a checklist.

It is hoped that during the visits to the selected schools, classroom observations will be conducted by the researcher. Personal interviews in the form of informal discussions and conversations will be conducted with head teachers and teachers. A checklist for classroom observations and focus group discussions will be used.

Data Analysis

The data collected will be analyzed using a mixed method, which combines elements of quantitative and qualitative research to achieve the objectives of the research. This method helps considerably to understand the results rather than a standalone quantitative or qualitative result. UNESCO (2020) asserts that combining multiple data sources improves validity in educational research. The rationale for using the mixed method design for this work is as follows:

- iii. Mother tongue involves implementing policy and using the right pedagogy. It also involves studying the social attitude of the community. The mixed method approach will be appropriate for such studies.
- iv. Challenges and prospects include both measurable and perception-based issues; therefore, the mixed method approach is suitable for such work.

Tyler Dye (2022) defines qualitative data analysis as “A process of gathering, structuring and interpreting qualitative data to understand what it represents”. To test the hypothesis of this research, a content analysis will be carried out. This will help to identify the patterns that emerge from the data. Klaus Krippendorff (2018) defines content analysis as: “A research technique for making replicable and valid references from text to context of their

use”. This simply means studying the information in a structured way to understand the meaning and patterns. In achieving the objectives of this research work, research questions will be formulated. These questions will help us to achieve a satisfactory interpretation of the data and subsequently meet the objectives of this work.

On the other hand, the quantitative analysis involves a technique by which the analyst relies on mathematical and statistical figures and models to reach the objectives set. True Tamplin (2022). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 17) define mixed-method research as: “Mixing or combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, concepts or language into a single study”. In analyzing the quantitative data, the researcher will use the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Whereas for the qualitative data, the researcher will do his analysis using a descriptive procedure. From the analysis highlighted above, the data will be summarized, conclusions drawn, and recommendations made.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This is a presentation of the findings of the questionnaires administered to selected primary schools in Western Rural District, aimed at finding out the challenges of L1 education. A total of ten schools were randomly selected and assessed to determine how teacher competence and the availability of teaching and learning materials influence the effective implementation of L1 education.

The findings are guided by the hypothesis that teacher competence in L1 instruction, as well as the inadequacy of instructional materials, significantly affected the success of L1 education in primary schools. The data were collected through relevant instruments such as questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations involving teachers and school administrators. In this chapter, we will analyze and interpret the data gathered, focusing on how the level of teacher preparedness, professional training, and access to appropriate L1 teaching materials contributed to or hindered the implementation of the L1 education programme. The outcome of this investigation will give an insight into the current state of L1 education in the Western Rural District and form the basis for discussions, conclusions, and recommendations in the subsequent chapter.

Table 1: What are the Challenges Encountered in the Implementation of the L1 Education Policy in the Western Rural District?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Lack of qualified teachers	7	22.6	22.6	22.6
	Parents prefer their kids to be educated in foreign languages: English and French	22	71.0	71.0	93.5

Poor implementation of the1 mother tongue education policy	3.2	3.2	96.8
Lack of teaching and learning1 materials.	3.2	3.2	100.0
Total	31	100.0	100.0

Table 1 presents the findings on the challenges faced in implementing L1 education in Western Rural District, Sierra Leone. It reveals that a greater percentage, 71.0%, of parents prefer their children to acquire learning through a foreign language. This is followed by a lack of trained and qualified teachers (22.6%). Poor implementation of the L1 education policy is 3.2%, and inadequate teaching and learning materials are 3.2%.

These findings imply that community attitudes and parents' attitudes towards the medium of instruction remain barriers to the successful implementation of the L1 education policy. Many parents regard English as superior to their L1 and as providing better job opportunities for people. The further shortage of trained and qualified teachers limits the effective delivery of L1 education, as teachers may lack the necessary linguistic and pedagogical skills. Also, weak policy implementation and insufficient instructional materials can hinder the quality of learning. This result suggests that stakeholder sensitization, teacher training, and the provision of teaching and learning materials are necessary for the successful implementation of the L1 education policy in the Western Rural District.

Figure 1: Bar Chart Indicating the Challenges in Implementing L1 Education in Western Rural District

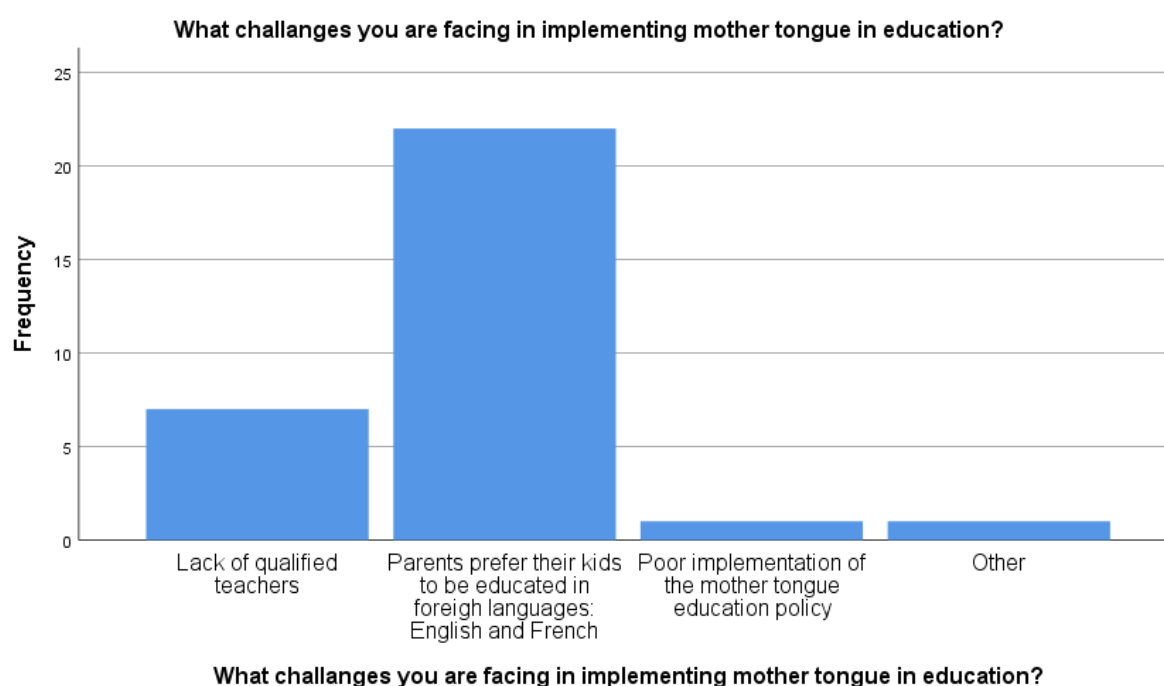
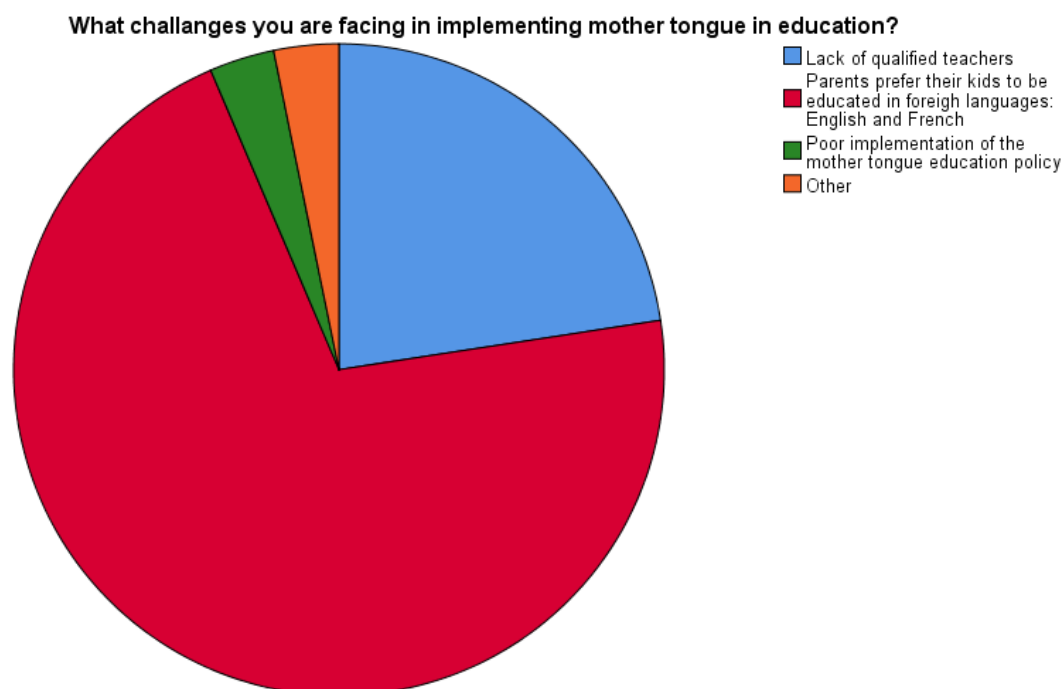


Figure 2: Pie Chart Challenges faced in the Implementation L1 education in Wester Rural District



VII. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This research investigates the challenges and prospects of L1 education in Western Rural District, Sierra Leone. The present language policy attaches much importance to L1 education as one of the quickest and most effective ways of acquiring learning. This study is guided by two objectives: to identify the challenges faced in implementing L1 education and to make recommendations on how these challenges can be addressed, for the smooth implementation of Mother Tongue Education in Western Rural District.

What are the challenges encountered in the implementation of Mother Tongue Education in the primary schools in Western Rural District?

From the analysis of the data collected, it was revealed that the implementation of the L1 education policy in primary schools within the Western Rural District faces several challenges. The most significant challenge the respondents identified was that parents prefer education in a foreign language, particularly English, accounting for 71 % of the responses. These findings show that parents are of the view that sound education, which is of economic benefit, can only be acquired through English. They therefore show limited support for L1 education policy.

Another challenge identified was the lack of trained and qualified teachers to teach L1, which constitutes 22.6%. Also, observations carried out in the classrooms showed that these teachers were trained only to teach in the lower primary schools and not specifically trained to teach the local languages. The shortage of teachers trained to teach L1 as a medium of instruction limits the effective delivery of L1 education and therefore affects the quality of teaching and learning.

Furthermore, it was identified that the L1 education policy was poorly implemented; 3.2% affirmed that. This indicates weaknesses in policy enforcement, monitoring and supervision, which hinder the successful implementation of the programme. The L1 is not used as a medium of instruction as prescribed by the Language policy. For example, in Ghana, the policy mandates that teaching and learning should be carried out in children's L1. Materials written in English must be translated into the learners' L1.

Similarly, 3.2 % of the respondents identified a lack of teaching and learning materials as a problem. The shortage of textbooks, reading materials, and instructional materials in local languages makes it difficult for teachers to implement the L1 education policy in the Western Rural District.

These obstacles could be addressed through community sensitizations; effective teacher training and the provision of adequate teaching and learning materials will enhance the implementation of the L1 educational policy.

Recommendations

This study is an assessment of the challenges of implementing the L1 Education Policy. Based on the findings from the data collected, we wish to make the following recommendations.

To address the challenge of parents preferring English to L1 as a language of instruction, we recommend:

- Increase public awareness and sensitization, organize community meetings, radio discussions, and school outreach programmes to educate parents on the educational benefits of L1 as a medium of instruction, especially in the early grades of schooling.
- Engage community leaders, local authorities, and religious leaders to help advocate the value of L1 education and to influence parents positively.
- Promote bilingual education, emphasizing that L1 education is not replacing English but serves as a foundation for learning English effectively. Pupils can learn in their L1 while gradually acquiring English skills.

Another challenge highlighted by the respondents is the lack of teaching and learning materials in the local languages. We recommend the following interventions:

- Government should provide adequate funding for the production and distribution of teaching and learning materials in local languages to all primary schools.
- Encourage local production of materials by involving the TTIs, curriculum specialists and local language experts in developing culturally relevant teaching and learning materials.
- Strengthen partnership with NGOs and development partners to support the provision of teaching and learning materials and resources for L1 education programmes.

To address the challenges of a lack of trained and qualified teachers, we recommend the following:

- Integrate L1 education into the curricula of teacher training institutions so that pre-service teachers acquire the knowledge and skills needed to implement mother-tongue instruction before entering the classroom. For example, the University of Education, Winneba, in Ghana, offers a programmes designed to strengthen L1 education policy. The policy requires the use of L1 as the medium of instruction from kindergarten to P3. This course was developed to train teachers, conduct research in L1 instruction, develop L1 curricula, and produce teaching and learning materials to support the policy nationwide. In Ghana, even when textbooks are not written in the learners' L1, teachers are required to translate them into the learners' L1 before teaching. (Ministry of Education, Ghana, 2012, p. xi)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1.] Alie J.A.D. (1990). A new history of Sierra Leone. Macmillan Overseas Ltd.
- [2.] Brown H.D. (2007). Principles of language learning and teaching (5th ed.). Pearson Education.
- [3.] Clinton R. & Gabriel H. (2000). UNESCO and language policy and planning. UNESCO.
- [4.] Cruswell J.W. (2018). Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach (5th ed.) SAGE Publications.
- [5.] Cummins J. (2000). Language, power, and pedagogy: bilingual children in crossfire. Multilingual Matters.
- [6.] Genesee, F., Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W., & Christian, D. (2005). English language learners in U.S. schools: An overview of research findings. Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, **10**(4), 363–385. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327671espr1004_2 ([doi.org in Bing](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327671espr1004_2))
- [7.] George Yule (05/07/2022). The study of language (4th ed.). www.cambridge.org/9780521765275
- [8.] Government of Ghana, Ministry of Education. (2004). White paper on the report of the education reform review committee. Accra: Ministry of Education.
- [9.] Government of Sierra Leone (1995). New educational policy for Sierra Leone. Department of Education. Government Printers, Freetown.
- [10.] Government of Sierra Leone. (1991). The constitution of Sierra Leone (Acts No.6 of 1991). Government Printers.
- [11.] Government of Sierra Leone. (1970). White paper on educational policy. Government Printers.
- [12.] Kamanda M.C. (2002). Mother tongue education and transitional literacy in Sierra Leone: prospects and challenges. Language and Education (2002). Vol. 1615,3.
- [13.] Kim, Y.S.G. & Piper, B. (2019). Cross-language transfer for reading skills: an empirical investigation of bidirectionality and the influence of instructional environment. Reading and Writing. 32(4),839-871.Leech, N. & Onwuegbuzie, A. (2008). A typology of mixed methods research design: quantitative and qualitative. 34(21), (pp265-275)
- [14.] Muchemi, J. (2024). Effectiveness of L1 instruction on literacy rate of L1 education in Kenya, examining the transition from indigenous language in urban and rural settings. Journal of Education and Practice. 10(4), 40-51 <https://doi.org/10.47604/ajep.3032>
- [15.] Orodho, A.J. (2003). Essentials of education and social science research methods. Nairobi Masola Publishers.
- [16.] The University of Texas at Arlington. Libraries. (2025). What is qualitative research? UTA libraries. https://libguides.uta.edu/quantitative_and_qualitative_research/qual.
- [17.] Trudell, B. (2025). Language of instruction and multilingual education in sub-Saharan Africa. Background Papers and Policy Commentary on Multilingual Education.
- [18.] UNESCO. (2022). Why mother language-based education is essential. UNESCO.
- [19.] UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2020). World teachers' day 2020 fact sheet. UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
- [20.] UNESCO. (2016). If you don't understand, how can you learn? Global Education Monitoring Report Paper 24. UNESCO.