

## IMPROVING TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN GHANA THROUGH AN ALTERNATIVE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

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### ABSTRACT

The study looked at how technical vocation education and training (TVET) could be improved in Ghana through an alternative medium of instruction. The methodology employed is a qualitative one. The instruments used were observations, interviews, focused group discussions and document analysis. It was found out that the English –only medium of instruction does not bring about effective classroom interaction; hence leading to exclusion and poor performance. The language used in the textbooks is not learner friendly and that both teachers and learners pay much attention to theory than practical work due to the nature of assessment.

**Keywords:** Alternative medium of instruction, policies, technical vocational education, training.

### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Policies are key to the development of a nation; however, decontextualized policies are likely to be inimical to a nation especially when the policies are alien or parallel to the culture of the people, the crux of which is language. The language policy of Ghana as indicated by Gbedemah (1975) has played a crucial role of unifying the diverse ethnic groups. The language of education also, above the lower primary school, is English but this policy seems to be failing learners as it seems not to build a strong layer for them to always link prior knowledge to present knowledge and apply it appropriately at different levels of real life situations. The situation seems not so good for all learners at all levels but it appears very unfavorable with those in technical vocation education and training.

The technical vocational category of students and graduates are in a way marginalized when it comes to job placement and continuing their education at the tertiary level (Apreko, 2011; Amedorme and Fiagbe, 2013). In a quest to know what the nation wants Amedorme and Fiagbe (2013) questioned:

“... as a country, is it the English Language ... that we are looking for or the advancement in science and technology?”

The above questioned is posed as a result of what the universities and polytechnics demand graduates of technical vocational institutions to produce as a requirement in English before they can proceed in their pursuit of higher education. Instead of students spending 70% on the practical aspect and 30% on theory as indicated by Dzeto in a parliamentary briefing paper, the reverse becomes the case which is not different from the traditional white colored-gear

courses. Consequently, there is a mismatch between desired, acquired skills and the market needs as described by Atchoara and Delluc (2001).

The mismatch indicates under performance by TVET graduates not because of what other researchers have pointed to as obsolete or lack of equipment and machinery but can be attributed to the English-Only-Medium of instruction. The issue of critical thinking and creativity, key to technical vocational oriented education, seems missing not because of inability but due to inappropriate medium of instruction implemented in wholesale.

Trudell (2005), Cummins (1996) and Gajendragadkar (1967) argue that the usage of mother tongue is inevitable to the success of a child's performance in education. They indicate that the usage of mother tongue in the classroom enhances students' participation, decreases attrition, and many more. A learner struggling with an unfamiliar language in the classroom, equally struggles with linking prior knowledge to present. Application of knowledge in life situation appears absent. The unavailability of prior knowledge brings about a missing link and the learner is unable to utilize the schemata effectively for learning (Motala, 2013; Trudell and Piper, 2014). The outcome in education is the production of 'passive imitators' instead of 'active creative contributors' as pointed out by Radovic-Markovic.

Consequently, it is evident that the current language policy of education in Ghana is posing a challenge to performance in TVET. There is the need, therefore, to think of an alternative medium of instruction that could be helpful to the students acquiring the needed skills necessary to the development of the individual, society and the nation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In recognition of the inalienable right to education and the important role learning plays in the life of nationals, Ghana 1992 Constitution in Article 25 Cause (1) stipulates that all persons shall have the right to educational opportunities and facilities with the view to obtaining the full realization of that right. Clause (1b) states that technical and vocational education should be made generally available and accessible to all by appropriate means. Some inevitable questions ensue from the above.

1. What is meant by appropriate means?
2. Does appropriateness refer to the methodology of technical vocational instructors?
3. Is the appropriateness about the choice of appropriate medium of instruction suitable to the learner?

The third question above is the missing link that has never or little been thought of. The English-only medium of instruction seems to create more problems for all categories of students and the most affected are those in technical vocational education. It is perceived that those who choose to pursue technical vocational education are those who are academically weak. This weakness is as a result of the medium of instruction as indicated by Opoku-Amankwa (2009), Andoh-Kumi (1998) and other researchers.

The choice of the medium of instruction being a cause of students under performance is further illustrated as follows:

“... the wrong choice of school language is likely to be the deciding factor in large numbers of drop-outs and children achieving lower skills in leaving school than expected” (Pinnock, 2009:28).

It is not surprising that graduates from technical vocational institutions come out ill-equipped with employable skills to either enter the job market or set up their own businesses as has been the main objective of technical vocational education and training. The barrier to their successful performance is the school language used. Commenting on barriers to effective school performance, Pinnock (2009:41) states: “For children facing other barriers in education, appropriate language of instruction can tip the balance to exclusion.” The holistic implementation of the language policy in Ghana has tipped the balanced. Learners seem to be physically present but absent minded due to the language of instruction. Allright and Bailey (2004:173) conclude:

*The use of unfamiliar language as instructional communication deprives students their usual means of communication and hence the opportunity to behave normally. It takes away something from their humanness and lets them feel they are representing themselves badly, showing only some of their real personality and intelligence.*

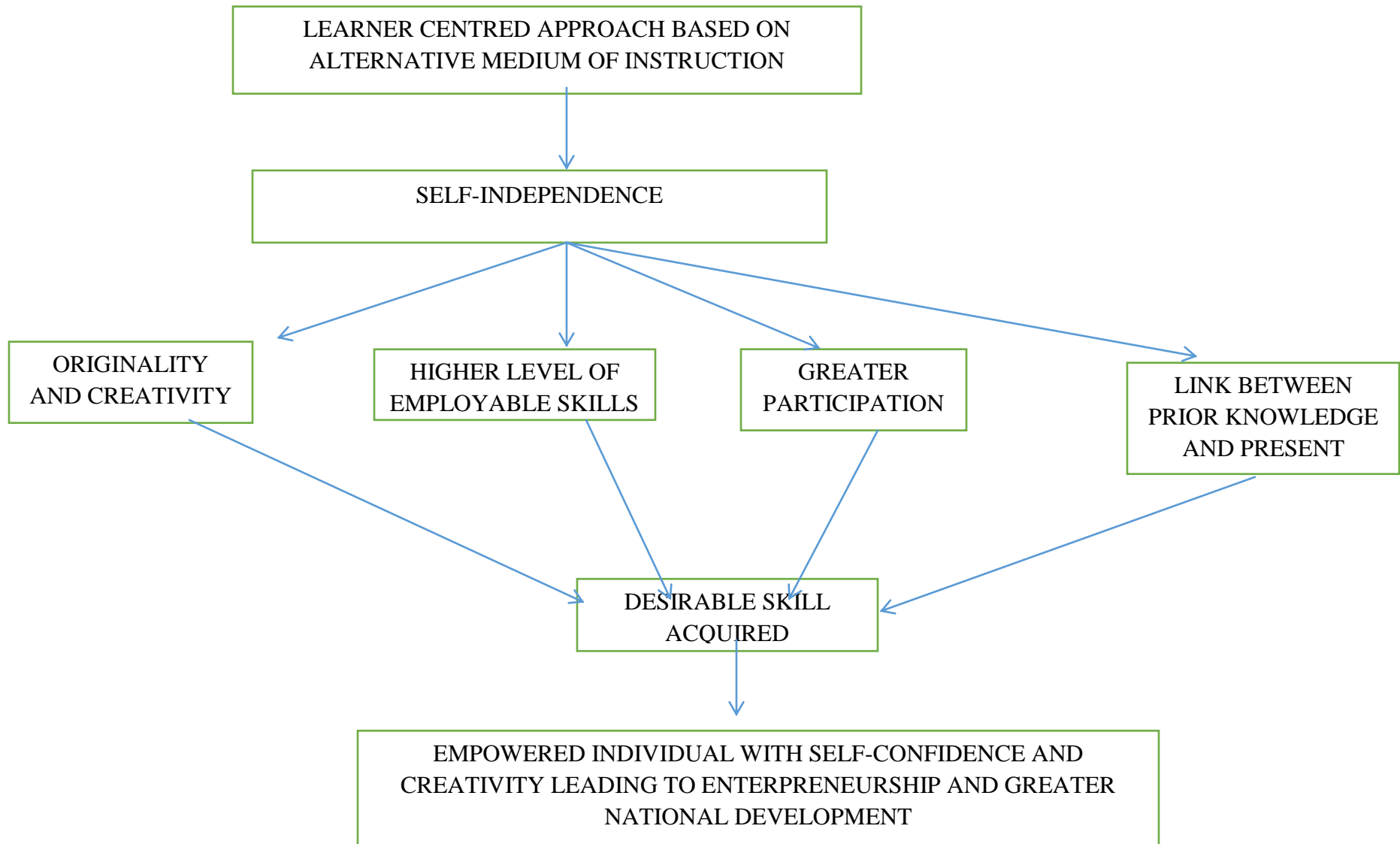
Amedorme (2013), Atcheorena (2002) and Djan-Fordjour (2013) have variously commented on the woes of technical vocational education in Ghana, none has actually linked the woes to the English-only medium of instruction. Opoku-Amankwa (2009) has also researched on the English-only medium but his concentration is on the performance of students in the English language at the primary level. There is therefore little that has been done on the English-only medium of instruction and performance at the technical vocational education and training. Hence, the work tried to look at how Ghana as a nation can benefit fully from TVET by considering an alternative medium of instruction.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was a qualitative one that involved classroom observation of instructors and students, interviews, focus group discussions mainly with learners and documentary analysis. In terms of documentary analysis, assessment of the textbooks was of prime interest. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of institutions to be used. In order to avoid the complaint of lack of equipment and infrastructure, well-equipped institutions, one each from the northern, the middle and the southern zones were used. This selection necessary because the multilingual nature of each zone is unique.

The following framework was used.

### CONCEPTUALIZATION OF TVET THROUGH AN ALTERNATIVE LANGUAGE MODE OF INSTRUCTION



## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Education that fails to empower the individual to function effectively in his/her society is dysfunctional. TVET in Ghana seems to fall under the category of dysfunctionality because many graduates of TVET come out of schools yet find it difficult to communicate effectively using the official language of Ghana. One then wonders how they managed to complete their programmes and mostly hold certificates that indicate that they successfully completed their courses. They equally do not prove effective in the skill-oriented aspect of their course as indicated by Atchoara and Delluc (2001). It was discovered that most of these graduates decided to go to the wayside uncertificated apprentices to learn a skill either related to what they offered in school or totally different from what they offered in school. Surprisingly, they fare so well in the skill performance better than when they were in formal education.

The question one is likely to ask is what has brought about this variation in performance? It was found out that the medium of instruction was a familiar language which was almost used in the daily activities of the person under training. Most of those who pass out from their apprenticeship work move on to establish their own businesses without difficulty. If the same person could not perform whilst under formal education but has finally acquired employable skills under informal education, it is therefore evident that the difference came in as a result of the choice of medium of instruction. It would be proper if technical and vocational institutions begin to think of finding an alternative language for instruction when it comes to practical work that aims at equipping students with appropriate, desirable and employable skills.

During the focused group discussion, one of the participants said:

*I am always struggling to even grasp the English language used by my instructors. As I struggle to understand, I lose track of any concepts. I sometimes feel within myself that I have a question to ask but how to communicate using the unfamiliar language reduces me to nothing. I finally lose interest in the lesson. Most at times I am physically present but absent minded. I even believe I am wasting my time.*

The above statement is in line with Opoku-Amankwa (2009) finding that many pupils in the class were spectators watching the teacher and a few 'good' pupils perform. It also affirms Allright and Bailey (2004) work that the use of an unfamiliar language as instructional communication deprives learners their usual means of communication and hence the opportunity to behavior normally. It is clear that the participant above battles within himself as to how to convey his thoughts all because of an unfamiliar language.

Another interesting finding about the formal education was the mode of policy implementation in TVET. Though the syllabus stipulated 70% of hands-on-practice as indicated by Dzeto in his parliamentary briefing paper, time allocated for practical work was less than 50%. When the researcher wanted to find out why less attention was paid to the practical aspect, instructors complained that the equipment available were not in use. Some of the machines were just in the institution for decorative purposes. Where the machines are functioning, one has to go through the bottle necks of bureaucracy before getting access to use them. In order to avoid frustration, instructors prefer to use blackboard illustrations to convey their concepts. The practical aspect therefore becomes very minimal and theorization takes over thereby reversing the percentage allotted for practical and theory.

The mode of assessment was equally a great concern to the researcher. In trying to know how the rating is done it was disclosed that the theory was assessed independent of the practical.

The practical aspect was done internally whilst that of the theory was eternally assessed. The mode of assessment goes to suggest why instructors pay much attention to the theory aspect than the practical aspect. What most institutions do is to wait until some few days to examinations and they take their students through what is expected. It is not therefore surprising to see many students obtaining passes in the practical part of the courses than the theory part. But the fact remains that if learners had been actively involved in the teaching learning process, the performance would have been quite higher than it is shown currently. It must be said that the underperformance is attributable to the English-only medium of instruction. If an alternative medium of instruction familiar to the learner were used, it would go a long way to reduce anxiety and promote self-confidence and creativity in learners as depicted by Ward (2004).

On the part of why instructors paid less attention to practical work, the researcher interviewed some of the instructors admitted that it was during their programmes either at the university or at the polytechnic, emphasis was on theory. They knew that their success was on how they regurgitated what was given them during lectures. Whether those theories were understandable or not, it was not the matter. They needed to come out with 'respectable' classes. How the knowledge was relevant and applicable in another situation was another thing. A participant had the following:

*In Ghana, they value paper – I mean certificates – not skills. I am yet to see or hear a technical or vocational institution that has recruited an employee during an interview through practical work. They examine how well you are dressed, y certificate(s) and ask you theory questions.*

The problem of ill-equipped graduates from technical vocational institutions from the recruitment process as well as how tertiary institutions prepare their graduates for the job market. The statement that Ghanaians value certificates is true. Even when one is seeking the job of a cleaner, he/she is asked to attach a certificate. If the attitude of Ghanaians is not changed from certificate assessment to performance, many non-performing citizens with 'good' certificates will continuously occupy places little or no effective contribution to the building of a nation.

The suggestion for the use of an L1 as an alternative medium of instruction may be viewed with suspicion. Some may think that there is going to be class division as confirmed by Brock-Utne (2001). People distrust the motives of those who advance the arguments in favour of the use of mother tongue. They usually think the issue is to debase education in Africa. It may even become more suspicious when it is tilted towards TVET.

The alternative medium of instruction that is being suggested is not for it to take over the whole curriculum of TVET. Students' performance in skills acquisition is what needs to be addressed. English will still be taught as a subject, will still be used as the official language in the institutions but when it comes to practical work, the L1 must be used. Which Ghanaian language to use? The colleges of education in Ghana have set the pace in the offering of Ghanaian languages as a course. The model in the colleges of education can be replicated in TVET in Ghana.

The curriculum materials used for language instructions seem inappropriate. There seems to be no uniformly prescribed textbook(s) used by the selected institutions. Teachers of the English language were at liberty to choose whatever materials they found appropriate. The appropriateness of the material evaluation did not take into consideration the language

difficulty level of the materials and interest of the learner. The choice of the material was based on teacher's convenience and interest. This study supports EdQual (2010) that did studies on textbooks of Ghana and Tanzania and said that the language level textbooks was higher than the level of the learner. Language teachers appear ignorant on how to evaluate material and it was not surprising to find that language use in textbooks that teachers use for the purpose of teaching is difficult for learners at technical vocational education and training.

## CONCLUSION

Policies are good to guide and direct an organization or a nation. The language policy of Ghana, the English-only medium of instruction, has not so much helped in building a solid foundation in education in Ghana. However, lack of political will, stakeholders' preferences and suspicion of policy implementers has kept the pendulum still in motion. There is the need to take a step by implementing an alternative medium of instruction in TVET in Ghana so that the desired manpower will be trained.

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