

## **The Rationale behind Mother Tongue Policy in the Rwandan Competency-Based School Curriculum: A Move in the Right Direction**

**Dr. Eugene Ndabaga**

Associate Professor

Department of Foundation, Management and Curriculum Studies

School of Education

University of Rwanda

College of Education

P. O. Box 5039 Kigali

Rwanda

**Dr. Cyprien Tabaro**

Lecturer

Department of Humanities and Language Education

School of Education

University of Rwanda

College of Education

P. O. Box 5039 Kigali

Rwanda

### **Abstract**

*More than a half of Rwandan adults are illiterate while most Rwandans have a little knowledge in French and English; languages in which Rwandan children are forced to do formal learning despite that they all share one language, Kinyarwanda-the mother tongue. The UNESCO (1977) reaction to this formidable situation was that every child should begin education in his/her mother tongue. Mackenzie and Walker (2013) highlighted the importance of following a curriculum designed in the mother-tongue as literacy is concerned asserting that a curriculum rooted in the child's known language, culture and environment, with appropriate and locally-developed reading and curriculum materials, is crucial for early learning success. Since 2009, Rwandans are taught in English while they cannot express in it easily as oral fluency is concerned and the government intend to implement a competence-based curriculum. How shall this be successfully when learners cannot express themselves in English? This paper highlights the importance of the mother-tongue policy in a country like Rwanda where people share one language if well implemented.*

**Keywords:** Mother tongue, competence, school curriculum.

### **1. Introduction**

*' I regret that the dialects have gone , and I regret that a process by which for want of a better name we have agreed among ourselves to call Education , we are drifting away from the language of the people, and losing some of the best English words and phrases which have lasted in this country through the centuries' ( Quotation by Baldwin, in Swchartz,1984:14).*

According to Johnson et al. (1985), it is generally believed that human beings have been on earth for several million of years, yet not until about 10,000 years ago did people start to raise food, tame animals, build canoes, and live together in small communities. It is claimed to be about 6,000 years ago that a written language was developed. With a written language, people felt a need for formal communication. As societies became complex and the body of knowledge increased, people recognised a need for schools. The written language helped to record the knowledge learnt and pass it from generation to generation.

## **2. Language need and education**

Language has always been central to education. But this was not an easy road, for centuries; many comparative educationists have been faced with a problem of Universalism and Particularism in education. According to Obanya (2003, quoted in Khan, 2014), education fully develops human potentials in all the situations involving human potentials, especially the cognitive power and in any program taking the cognitive abilities of the human being into consideration language is a necessary instrument of thought. Jullien de Paris (cited, in Johnson et al. 1985) highlighted the spatial and temporal circumstances that influence education systems, and emphasised respectively 'local realities' and the 'living spirit of nations', which determine and explain education policies and their outcomes in a variety of cultural contexts. However, as a part of culture, the language question has persistently remained a controversial issue on the continent of Africa and elsewhere; in this case, Rwanda in particular. Obanya (1980) noted that it has been always felt by African Educationists that the African child's major learning problem is linguistics.

Instruction is given in a language that is not normally used in his or her immediate environment, a language which neither the learner nor the teacher understands and uses well enough. Several debates have been conducted to figure out whether it is the native language or a foreign one that should be given more value in an education system. In this connection, the core point remains that the language chosen as the medium of instruction should be relevant to the learning requirements of a changing world (Carroll, 1993:89). In line with 1924 Phelps-Stokes commission's proposals in Mazrui (1997) in favour of promoting the education of the natives in their environment, the Franck (Belgian Minister for colonies) commission's report of 1925 recommended for Rwanda, Burundi and Congo that school curricula be adapted to the local environment and teaching had to be conducted in indigenous languages though the policy was not fully implemented and French kept dominating in the education system of these countries.

### **2.1. The mother tongue and its importance in enhancing education**

Different scholars attempted to define the mother tongue in a variety of ways. According to Khan (2014), the mother tongue and motherland are abstract notions. However, according to him, the mother tongue is the language to which the emotional attachment is strongest, the language ensuring all the cultural riches whose destruction results in the destruction of innovativeness and creativity. In the same line, Orekan (2011) briefly defined mother tongue as the language one thinks, dreams and counts in. Ross (2004) provided a general definition claiming that the mother tongue is the language learnt from the family; the language used at home; the first language a child speaks; the language used in the community; the language most competent in; and the 'preferred' language. Talking about the importance of mother tongue, Daniel (2003, quoted in Khan, 2014) asserted that language and identity are linked – as the term 'mother tongue' implies.

Accordingly, a healthy identity balances different aspects of people's personalities. The author went on to state that a community expresses part of its identity in its language of instruction and a healthy society makes choices that promote harmonious communities and confident individuals. Coleman and Capstick (2012, quoted in Khan, 2015) claimed that the use of the mother tongue strengthens links between home and school and parents can become easily involved in education of their children without 'feeling afraid'. Mackenzie and Walker (2013) asserted that the mother tongue creates a smooth transition between home and school; stimulates interest and ensures greater participation and engagement, which prepares children for the acquisition of literacy and encourages fluency and confidence in both the mother tongue and, later, in other languages. Once a mother tongue is emphasised, at least in junior classes, it can act as a bridge to strengthen further learning (UNESCO, 1977).

Scholars do not neglect the importance of second and/or foreign languages in education at a certain level, but highlighted that when the mother tongue is fully mastered it can facilitate learning other languages. Mackenzie and Walker (2013) stated that it is convincingly evident from research that a second language is learnt best when a first language-mother tongue, is learnt first while Pflapsen (2011) reinforced the idea saying that mastering a first language and core learning concepts promotes general cognitive development that is needed to more easily and rapidly learn a second language. Hence, for UNESCO (1953, in Khan, 2014) the culture and the personality of the individual are reflected in his language, hence, the use of the mother tongue for instruction will always foster the culture values of the child.

## **2.2. The Rwandan case**

Being one of few countries of the world where the entire population have one common language, since the introduction of modern schooling with missionaries and colonisers, Rwanda has never given much priority to Kinyarwanda-the mother tongue which could favour Rwandan children explore all their potentialities in education. According to Ball (2010), since 1953, UNESCO is supporting the right of children to learn their mother tongue, and is advocating the maintenance of cultural and linguistic diversity through language-in-education policies. In spite of the strong recommendations by UNESCO of implementing the mother-tongue based curriculum at early education, Rwanda gradually went away from dominant use of Kinyarwanda to French right from primary school. As if this was not bad enough, the influx of returnees in 1994 from Anglophone countries forced another language on the scene-English. How can Rwanda children contain and comprehend deeply their studies in this 'ocean of linguistic-neo colonialism' (Mazrui, 1997), as long as they are not taught in Kinyarwanda, a language spoken by every Rwandan?

Note that according to Mackenzie and Walker (2013) children need to be engaged in and excited about reading and learning and this can only be done if the materials are ones which they will understand and enjoy. In the support of this, Sathiaseelan (2013) claimed that children think and dream in the mother tongue, so training in mother tongue use is the first instrument of human culture and the first essential of schooling. Moreover, Mackenzie and Walker (2013) asserted that the availability of good learning materials, written in a language and with a context that is relevant to children is vitally important; a lack of such materials has a profoundly negative effect on children's learning and on literary achievements. In view of this, some practical compromise is necessary among educators and politicians to decide to what level of schooling Kinyarwanda language should be compulsory since this is what is immediately best for Rwandans and their children to strengthen their sense of identity and nationhood rather than to be doomed to this kind of intellectual colonialism.

The 1948 Education reform in Rwanda, according to Nsubuga, (1999) was engineered by missionaries on behalf of Belgium. It is with this reform that the idea of preparing an intellectual élite began to emerge. The curriculum and the structural patterns of Education gradually became 'metropolitan', that is 'Belgian'. This implied the gradual use of French as the medium of instruction from the early grades of the elementary schools in Rwanda. Between 1948 and independence in 1962, all the operations of the colonial government in Education sector in Rwanda were communicated in French. Hence French became the official language in the country. At the time of independence, the objectives of the colonial government had been achieved. Like all French colonies, Rwanda élite who blessed the 'independence flag' had been turned into 'French Rwandan' both in dress and manners. This is widely summarised as 'French assimilation policy' Reheema (1996). Later, as stated in the introduction, after the 1994 Tutsi Genocide due to Rwandan repatriates who came from 'Anglophone' countries, English was promoted to being an official language alongside French and Kinyarwanda and as years went on, with the world influence of the world superpowers English was declared a sole medium of instruction at all levels of education in 2008 while very few Rwandans could not use that language.

According to Assan and Walker (2012) recent statistics revealed that 3.9 per cent of the Rwandan population speaks French, only 1.9 per cent fluently uses English while more than 99 per cent of Rwandans, if not all use Kinyarwanda fluently and accurately. Rosendal (2009) reiterated the uniqueness of the Rwandan language situation claiming that unlike most other African nations, virtually all Rwandans, speak the everyday Kinyarwanda. It is in this perspective that some authors question the dominance use of English in Rwandan education to understand why the policy in countries like Rwanda refrains from promoting the local language (Deforche, 2015). The author wondered if Rwanda is committed to creating more unity, why don't they promote the use of Kinyarwanda, the common language for all Rwandans. Writing about language policies in Africa, Omoniyi (2003) confirmed that language policy in Africa is often motivated by a specific interest of the elite [who probably master the promoted foreign language], which is not good. The introduction of mother-tongue based policies and programs normally goes beyond pedagogical motivation to address social and political aims (Benson, 2004). However, according to what has been taking place in Rwanda, Deforche (2015) claimed that the language policy is far from serving educational goals for those who need it most, whenever motivated by international politics and economic arguments. Taking into account that a language vehicles people's culture, and the fact that Rwandans share one language in common, Kinyarwanda should be given a high consideration as language of instruction is concerned, especially at pre-school and primary level.

This will serve as a pillar to protecting the Rwandan culture, the language itself, to instil civic education and human values among Rwandan children when learning and interacting in the language they understand most.

### **3. The role of mother tongue in education systems**

#### **3.1. The historical view**

Ornstein and Levine (1987: 84) observed that the study of ancient Greek civilisation provides valuable lessons on citizenship and civic education, which illuminate the role of education in shaping good citizens. Before the colonial period, Africans had a kind of education system that was tradition-based, to educate for posterity. Their curriculum was not written down in books, had no specialised teachers, and was not conducted in 'schools' as we know them today. It operated in such a way that education was acquired throughout the lifetime. Most of the learning was practical, and was organised according to the cultural patterns of the society. According to Nyerere (1968:46), African indigenous education was intended to perform three important aspects: to preserve and develop cultural heritage, to provide the young with means of earning a living, and to prepare for posterity. The kings, chiefs, sub-chiefs and elders of the time encouraged this kind of education in traditional African societies. The pre-colonial curriculum in African societies was basically centred on practical values, and put much emphasis on the skills relevant to the society.

It had firm roots in the morals, values, norms, beliefs and customs of the society. The skills and values acquired were intended to an African child to live happily and well in a predominantly rural society, and contribute to the improvement of life there. Nyerere (*ibid.* p.45), noted the fact that, pre-colonial education in Africa did not have 'schools'. This, however, does not mean that African children were not educated. They learned by living and doing. In his view, education was 'informal' and every elder was to some extent a teacher. Children learnt different types of grasses suitable for certain purposes, crop planting, harvesting, and animal care, by having full participation with their societies. All this was learnt in the children's native tongues. The classrooms for this kind of education were not in 'schools' as in 'formal' education, instead it was conducted in tree-shades, near fire places, in gardens or fields, and by the lake's or river's side. Knowledge was imparted in learners through storytelling, songs, riddles, idioms, dances, and drama, playing games, performing social ceremonies, poems and proverbs. The medium of instruction in all the above aspects was the mother tongue of the particular society, and this was the case in Rwanda.

With respect to this, some African governments are improvising means of making their education systems rural-centred and community based. They are advocating a strong mother tongue policy in a bid to revive the broken cultural institutions on the continent. Hence, Rwanda should also try to follow this example and unite its people through their mother tongue. Nyerere (1968) gave credit to his country for having Africanised its education system. He made the following remarks: 'our national songs and dances are once again being learned by our children; our national language has been given the importance in our curriculum which it needs and deserves (*ibid.* p.49). Nyerere is the only African leader, recommended for having united his country (Tanzania) under a rural-based economy, with 'Kiswahili' as a national language, and a medium of instruction at lower levels of schooling. This is unique in Africa; no wonder, Tanzania is the only sub-Saharan country that is untouched by ravages of war and divisions. The argument Nyerere (1968) made was that, the form of imperialism which indigenous people in Rwanda and elsewhere, where there is a loss of mother tongue use emerged from that period of European history known as the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment provided the spirit, the impetus, the confidence, the political and economical structure that facilitated the search for new knowledge.

#### **3.2. From political and cultural perspectives**

Whilst imperialism is often thought of as a system which drew everything back into the centre, Ngugi(1986) argued that, it was also a system which distributed material and ideas outwards. Ngugi used Said's notion of 'positional superiority' to conceptualise the ways in which knowledge and culture were as much part of imperialism as raw materials and military strength. It is through our improved knowledge, Ngugi maintained that we indigenous people often research for the fragments of 'ourselves' that were taken, catalogued, studied and stored. I am not intending to narrate the story of the Western history of knowledge, but rather to draw attention on the influence of politics on mother tongue policy in Rwanda, and to what extent the mother tongue has been distorted through the education of the colonial élite and indigenous or 'native' intellectuals. The dominance of language of foreign origin on the education scene opposes the move to provide for the basic educational needs for all.

On the other hand, the right for all citizens to participate in the policy making processes of their country, and the empowerment of local communities, as advocated by current democratic movements in Africa are at risk, when their cultural base and their means of expression are weakened. The decision in pluralist societies to use foreign language instead of local language in the context of unequal power and access to education can produce severe discrimination for the natives who depend on their mother tongue. For many indigenous people, Smith (1999) argued that the major agency for imposing positional superiority over knowledge, language and culture was colonial education. Indigenous languages, knowledge and culture were strongly marginalised. Colonial education was also used as a mechanism for creating new élite. Students were sent either to boarding schools or to metropolitan culture. This compelled a multitude of African young men and women to turn a deaf ear to their culture and native languages in search for élite status.

The FAWE (2000) emphasised that there are long standing traditions in Africa-that emphasise the home as the place of learning-cultural traditions and practical skills. Colonial education came and put a knife on African cultural traditions and now our society can no longer act like one. What used to characterise an African home does not have a place in modern education system. No wonder Africans today, think, dress and talk in a Euro-centric style. Chinua Achebe, an African novelist presented such a situation in his two famous novels 'Things Fall Apart' and "No Longer Ease'. In his first novel, he reiterated that things fall apart and the centre cannot hold while in the second one he reminded Africans that since things had fallen apart Africans trying to cope all that is from Western forgetting their rooted culture, and since then life is no longer at ease'. Commenting on the relationship between education and culture, A World Bank Review (1998) makes this observation: 'Education is also about culture; it is the main instrument for disseminating the accomplishments of human civilisation (p.65)'.

In this respect, most African countries have launched an intensive campaign against illiteracy, by advocating a widespread mass education based on ruralisation. On the contrary, however, like any other developing country, Rwanda's education has turned out to be more modern-oriented and élite dominated than rural-centred and community based. Nsubuga(1999) revealed that UNESCO supports the use of national language or mother tongue as a medium of instruction at least in the lower part of education system as this is meant to foster a closer tie between the school and the society, as well as to rehabilitate national cultural values. According to UNESCO conference of African ministers of Education in Lagos (1976, in Bizimana 1999: 52), decolonising their Education system was the focal point in many developing countries. Within this movement, many national reform programmes highlighted the strategic role of national language, not only in the spreading of the benefits of education to all, but also in the transformation of the right cultural knowledge and values, the basis for an endogenous and deep-rooted form of development.

Educational reforms and innovations attempted in many African countries during the last twenty years or so were guided by the principle of integration of the school into the community. The aim has been to make school systems more Afro-centred, rural-oriented and serving the interests of the majority rather than the privileges of the minority. Thus, the mother tongue policy has been high on the agenda. It is with this attempt to achieve better ways of communication in the education system itself that policy makers have been trying to incorporate practical and cultural aspects into existing school curricula. Particular emphasis has been put on the learning and use of African languages in schools and colleges, as they embody the deep feelings and mental structures of the recipients of education. Those languages are also rightful vehicles of African culture and authenticity, as well as the potential channels of science and technology. However, most African governments, including Rwanda, have failed to hold a firm stand on their local languages, since most of their economies are not strong enough to support their language policies.

Thus foreign intervention has been inevitable and foreign languages have always taken priority in the allocation of funds. To make matters worse for Rwanda, due to many returnees from Anglophone countries, on top of French, English was added to the curriculum right from primary school. Emphasising national languages and in support of the Lagos conference, Mazrui (1998) stated: A policy of this type should lead to the revival of the national languages as a vehicle of scientific and technological process; it will enable our societies freed from all the sequels of foreign domination, to contribute in their own unique way to the fruitful dialogue upon which depends the full development of the world's civilization Mazrui (1997:49).

From this perspective, countries with levels of linguistic and cultural diversity and different colonial backgrounds such as Tanzania, built into their general education reform packages, innovative language policies aimed at strengthening the role of the national language in schools. Hawes (1979:77) ascertained that the increasing use of mother tongues, particularly in the junior classes improved the development of students' interest in studies and the writing of scholastic materials. Our national, cultural, and religious narratives of the past do shape our retrospective identities. But to fulfil this, the society needs a collective social base as revealed by the re-contextualised narratives of our past experiences. By understanding our past and stabilising it, we shall be projecting this stability to the future of the country. Following his study of the language question in Kenya, Simala (1998, cited in Nsubuga, 1999), observed that learning French involved learning to be a member of French culture. Indeed, French, Christianity and French culture were difficult to separate: they were one whole inextricable unit. I am not rejecting the need for any nation to share cultures of other nations since by so doing they can enrich theirs, but it should not be done at the expense of national culture.

Reheema (1996) reiterated that the objective of education as an instrument of intellectual liberation in Africa must therefore be to help nourish the culture, which must appreciate its values and resist invasion of many new cultures into African culture encapsulated in education practice, or at least present a different model. Thus education for liberation must provide the appropriate culture and with the culture, the orientation towards skills and material standards. In the area of culture, Reheema indicated that the African of today has lost the core of moral, ethical, and aesthetic values that could serve as his or her lodestar to life. According to Pieterse and Parekh (1995), it should be kept in mind that every culture, each with its own set of customs, no matter how 'irrational', is related directly or indirectly, to the inexorable logic of survival. In other words, it aims for the production and reproduction of material life and the survival of, if not of the whole human race, then at least the race or species one belongs to. Culture needs exclusion and purity to survive intact. It erects intellectual tariff boundaries. The slightest deviant thought threatens the culture's smooth mental fabric. Since the second World war, the world has increasingly become a 'global village', in which advances in science and technology enhance intercultural communication and exchange in education, while, at the same time, posing the risk of 'standardization' of cultures and the domination of 'peripheral' cultures by hegemonic 'central' ones.

Edelman (1984) argued that professionals in schools commonly engage in rationalisation, distortion, and repression in their language activities and even see these practices as part of their professional duties. Indeed, the important part of those duties is to define the status of their clients in education: the underachievers, the gifted and talented; the disabled; the retarded; the discipline problems; the delinquent. Bourdieu (1992) argued that all forms of power that impose meanings in such a way as to legitimate those meanings and conceal the relations that underlie the exercise of power itself add their own specifically symbolic force to those relations of power. In this way, the dominant ideas that are given communicative meaning and force through that exercise of power reinforce the power of those same dominant forces who are exercising it. They see the culture of the school, then, as a creation of the dominant culture. The former Rwanda government (1992) passed the law that the minimum qualification for any member of parliament would be A-level with fluency in French since all the parliamentary sessions were conducted in French. But not even a ninth of Rwanda's population had A-level. This law discriminated the majority of people at the expense of the few élite who enjoyed the government favours. The central problem for Rwanda is that up to now the dominant school culture and language are foreign, yet the majority of students come from highly disadvantaged and rural families.

They have no chance of practising the school knowledge in their environment since their own people can neither understand nor appreciate them. Consequently, the élite always form cliques and vacate their own villages. Unfortunately, schools in Rwanda, owing to the 'French assimilation system', still operate as if all children have equal access to this cultural capital ignoring the fact that has been destroyed by the foreign language. Schools base their assessments of school success, failure, award of certificates and qualifications on children's possession of this high status capital, in the case of Rwanda-French, yet by the virtue of high illiteracy rate, it belongs to very few people. Hence, the arrangements produced by schools do favour only the well to do families (political élite), the majority left out. Within the African context, upon the achievement of independent nationhood, political leaders privileged the consolidation of the symbols of unity and oneness, within the centralized new-states, as well as integration within the world wide economic and political processes, to the detriment of local identities and particularism.

Indeed, nationalism from its modern inception was inextricably bound up with language; language was seen as 'an outward sign of a group's peculiar identity and a significant means of ensuring its continuation (Herder, 1969: 84). The danger in the Rwanda education system is that it is becoming increasingly selective and 'modern-oriented,' while language policy in education becomes 'Euro-centric' in nature. Ngugi (1986) argued that when he wrote in his mother tongue, a language that people speak and really understand, and the message really reached the masses better than when he wrote in English. No wonder his writing caused anger from the politicians who thought he was instigating people to rebel against government policies. Mazrui, (1997: 46) claimed that for the time being, the prospects of a genuine intellectual revolution in Africa may depend in no small measure on a genuine educational revolution that involves, at the same time, a widespread use of African languages as media of instruction.

Humboldt (in Herder, 1969) believed in a strong interconnection between language and the development of 'intellectual peculiarity'; with these seen to 'emerge simultaneously and in reciprocal coincidence'. In a way Whorfian relativism is exemplified in this insistence that language is the 'spiritual exhalation' of the nation; thus 'its language is its spirit and its spirit is its language' (Cowan, 1963: 277) and 'language is the formative organ of thought' (p.287). Humboldt felt that nothing was more important for national culture and continuity than possession of the ancestral tongue. Briefly, what has been under discussion here is essentially the formation of educational policy that will affect individual and group identity. Language is often seen as central and even among those who understand that original group language is not, itself, a required component of identity, the idea often exists that when language goes, other features tend to follow. Thus, Rokkan and Urwin (1983) observed that language loss leads to further cultural 'erosion'.

### **3.3. Mother tongue education from the cognitive perspective**

Halliday (1978:1) observed that a child creates first his 'child tongue', then his mother tongue'. This means that any interruption in this social cognitive process might lead to negative effects on the child. Harris (1986:263) stated that, if a critical period of language learning does exist in infancy, then acquiring a second or third language would be easiest for the child while s/he is learning the native language. A good foundation of native language will thus facilitate the smooth learning of other subsequent languages. Carroll (1993) reminded us that learning to use a word in a meaningful way, that is, using it in such a way that it will be consistently socially reinforced, implies that the child has acquired the concept that underlies the linguistic response. Though many kinds of thinking are possible without language, language plays a big role in thinking. It facilitates thinking, allowing it to be more complex, efficient, and accurate. Carroll (1993) posed a question, 'Does the structure of the language we happen to speak affect our perceptions of the world and our dealings with it in any way that would be different if we happen to speak another language?'

Edwards (1998: 209) argued that the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. He advanced the view that language patterns are centrally important in structuring these distinct worlds. The concepts symbolised by the forms, form classes, and constructions of any one language do not always have exact counterparts in other languages; this is confirmed by Carroll (1993) that anybody who has tried to make a really faithful translation from one language to another becomes painfully aware of these differences. If this is so, it would appear to follow that the thinking processes of the speakers of one language are not the same as the thinking process of the speakers of any other language. Indeed, it would appear that a bilingual using one language thinks differently from the way he or she thinks in his or her other language. According to Carroll (1993), a language requires a child to pay attention to the shapes, forms, and materials of things that make him or her more likely to guide his or her behaviour on the basis of his or her environment.

The child normally grows up in a social environment in which a particular language is in use among the people in that environment. This language exhibits a relationship to the internal processes of these language users in their own transactions with their environment. In the early stage of language learning, a child's own preverbal internal processes are conditioned to the symbols used by others in his or her environment, but as the child assimilates the structure of his or her language, his or her internal processes become more and more like those of the speech community as a whole, at least in so far as these internal processes are represented in a language. The possession of particular concepts acquired through past experience is a major factor in the solution of problems or the performance of tasks e.g the concept of 'error' among Banyarwanda in Rwanda, goes beyond the usual interpretation of error (mistake).

For Banyarwanda ‘error’ implies ‘incest’ since it is one of the worst ‘taboo’ among Banyarwanda that can cause misfortune in the whole clan; indeed, the teaching of such concepts is one of the major functions of education. Therefore, one’s concept of any class of stimuli includes an assessment of its average reward value either to oneself or to the society with which one identifies. Bandura (1977) ascertained that much of what children know about their mother tongue, they learn by observing and imitating the speech around them. Thus, children can be expected to learn their native language and speak it well or poorly based on the equality of the imitative model. This confirmed the problems faced by Rwandan students and other students in developing countries where education is transmitted in second language right across the curriculum. The confusion and hardship these students face is unbearable, thus, my advocacy for Rwanda to put an emphasis on the teaching of mother tongue at least in junior classes since we are limited by written literature in other academic subjects.

According to Edwards (1994), a school is traditionally a strong arm of culture and central to its aims has always been a strong emphasis upon language. On the one hand, schools have attempted to refine and develop communicative skills with the language or languages of its constituency. Language facilitates thinking, allowing it to be more complex, efficient, and accurate; it may in some cases inhibit or misguide thinking; a structure of a particular language may channel thinking and thus cause the users of that language to think either more or less efficiently and accurately than they would if they were to use another language. Mehrotra (1998: 479) said that students who learnt to read in their mother tongue first, learn to read a second language easily and more quickly than those who learn to read in a second language first. In a sense, it may seem obvious that words with special, culture-specific meanings reflect and pass on not only living characteristics of a given society but also ways of thinking.

Culture-specific words are conceptual tools that reflect a society’s past experience of doing and thinking about things in certain ways; and they help to perpetuate these ways. As Rwandan society drastically changed after the 1994 war that saw an influx of returnees from different parts of the world having acquired, of course, different kinds of culture and languages, some of these tools seem to have been modified and others discarded. In this way, the outlook of Rwandan society today can never be determined by its traditional stock of conceptual tools, though it is clearly seen that the society is still influenced by them. Therefore, a person’s conceptual perspective on life is clearly influenced by his or her native language. This section can be well summed up by Wierzbicka (1997: 8) who argued that more often than not, the grip of people’s native language on their thinking habits is so strong that they are no more aware of the conventions to which they are party than they are of the air they breathe; and when others try to draw their attention to these conventions they may even go on with a seemingly unshakable self-assurance to deny their existence.

#### **4. Conclusion**

With a view that the government of Rwanda should give priority to mother tongue in language policy formulation and support, Nsubuga (1999:20) argued that the learning of a foreign language, whichever it may be, should never have priority over that of a national language. In his view, a system of education where a foreign language is used as a medium of instruction at the expense of a native one cannot in the long run develop, as people will always feel inferior to a certain extent. A language is a property of the people who speak it naturally. People who are forced to speak a language which is not theirs, are condemned to frustration, to the feeling of being strangers, while at the same time, they are dominated at home. Harmonious development is one that profoundly transforms people through their language. Thus for Rwanda to develop politically, economically and socially, there is a need to put a strong emphasis on ‘Kinyarwanda’ as their mother tongue. It has been always demanded by the citizens for Kinyarwanda to be taught as a full compulsory subject for all the primary cycle and medium of instruction in primary schools.

The government keeps on promising the change, but it has never done it. Even in primary grades one and two, where teachers try to teach in Kinyarwanda, teachers and a few influential elite parents find themselves swayed by the influence of French or English-which they themselves are not even confident of-hence producing semi-literate pupils. In order to ascertain whether this policy of mother tongue is of value to the nationals and how it is feasible to implement it, the government has to evaluate what the modern society of Rwanda wants. Rwandans need an education that promotes the integrity, dignity, identity, culture and respect of the nation; and all these can easily be transmitted to Rwandans in Kinyarwanda, their own language. Nsubuga (1999) argued that home is the first place where children learn right from their peers and parents; and this is done in their mother tongues.

Therefore, to strengthen this, children from six to twelve years need to join primary education and continue to learn in their mother tongues. Unfortunately, the government of Rwanda declines to follow this advice until 2012 though not fully implemented, on the ground that it is too early to change the system and Rwanda children go on failing to learn properly different aspects of their taught subject as the medium of instruction is English, the language that is not popularly used in Rwanda. Hopefully, it will not be forgotten forever.

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