Strengthening Bilingual and Multilingual Learning Systems in Francophone Africa:

Evidence from the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Introduction

Evidence has widely demonstrated multiple benefits of mother tongue–based multilingual education in low- and middle-income countries.[i] These advantages include increased attendance in school,[ii] long-term cost-effectiveness,[iii] higher likelihood of girls' and minority children's staying in school,[iv] better learning achievement outcomes in both children's familiar languages and targeted international languages,[v] and the development of cognitive skills that serve as a foundation for transfer from one language to a new language.[vi] However, language remains a significant obstacle to learning in many low- and middle-income countries.[vii] Children are often required to begin school and literacy instruction in language(s) they do not speak at home or in their communities, or to transition out of their home language after only brief periods.[viii]

In 2009, policymakers in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) introduced the national strategy for the use of national languages. According to the policy, teachers should use one of the four Congolese national languages (Ciluba, Kikongo, Kiswahili, and Lingala) as the primary language of instruction in Grades 1 through 4. The national language used would depend on the linguistic zone. During the early years, schools should teach both French and the national language as subjects. In Grades 3 and 4, students should transition to using French as a language of instruction, and then in Grade 5, French should be the primary language of instruction.

Research Objectives

This study aims to generate evidence to strengthen a bilingual and multilingual education system in DRC. To build knowledge about innovative solutions to plurilingual education challenges, we conducted mixed-methods research on determining optimal timing to transition to French from mother tongue instruction to ensure effective learning outcomes in both languages. We apply this method to develop one of the first empirical, skill-based transition models for DRC.

Overview of Research Design

Our study draws on both quantitative and qualitative methods. These include student and teacher language and literacy assessments, as well as interviews and focus group discussions with parents, teachers, students, school directors, and national-level stakeholders. Our team used quantitative methods to investigate students' and teachers' knowledge of languages, allowing us to

KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. WHAT LANGUAGE(S) DO STUDENTS USE AND UNDERSTAND?

2. TO WHAT EXTENT IS THERE A MATCH BETWEEN LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT LANGUAGE SKILLS?

3. IS THERE A THRESHOLD LEVEL OF L1 LITERACY SKILLS AND FRENCH ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS REQUIRED FOR FRENCH LITERACY?

4. WHAT ARE TEACHERS' PROFICIENCY LEVELS IN TARGET LANGUAGE(S) AND THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF SPECIFIC PEDAGOGIES FOR BILINGUAL / MULTILINGUAL LEARNING?

5. WHAT ARE COMMUNITY MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PREFERENCES REGARDING BILINGUAL / MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION?

6. WHAT ARE THE PERCEIVED COSTS AND BENEFITS TO CHILDREN AND PARENTS OF A MOTHER TONGUE–BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION MODEL?

evaluate the match/mismatch between the languages students understand and the languages they learn in. Qualitative methods were used primarily to address research questions regarding attitudes, knowledge, and practices regarding bilingual education. These qualitative data aided better understanding of the individual-, classroom-, and school-level dynamics that influenced the literacy outcomes.

We selected four regions (Haut-Katanga, Kinshasa, Kongo Central, and Lomami) – one from each of the four main language zones – for inclusion in our study to cover diverse language zones and both urban areas (which are likely to have more languages spoken) and rural areas (which are likely to have more predominant local languages). We sampled a total of 70 schools split among the regions and across urban and rural districts. From each school, we sampled Grade 2 and Grade 4 students. We randomly selected approximately 12 students per grade level from each school, for a total sample of about 1,680 students. For the qualitative approach, we purposively selected at least one urban and one rural school from each of the regions of the quantitative sample.

Findings

LANGUAGES SPOKEN

According to student language assessments, we found that **two out of three children were monolingual, while nearly a quarter were bilingual** (Figure 1). These numbers are similar across Grades 2 and 4; 60 per cent of Grade 2 children and 65 per cent of Grade 4 children were monolingual. Twenty-three per cent of children in Grade 2 and 24 per cent of children in Grade 4 were bilingual.

We see **large differences between the languages spoken by children and the likelihood that they are monolingual or bilingual** (Figure 2). Close to two-thirds (63 per cent) of the children who spoke French were multilingual, likely because French is the official language and, thus, they are more likely to be exposed to its usage. More than half the students who spoke French were bilingual. Nearly half (46 per cent) the students who spoke Lingala were bilingual, whereas a little more than a third (37 per cent) of Kikongo speakers were bilingual. In contrast, only 3 per cent of the students who spoke Kisonge were bilingual.

According to qualitative data, children listed a wide variety of languages they speak at home, and these languages also varied by region. Children

Figure 1. Percentage of monolingual, bilingual, and trilingual students
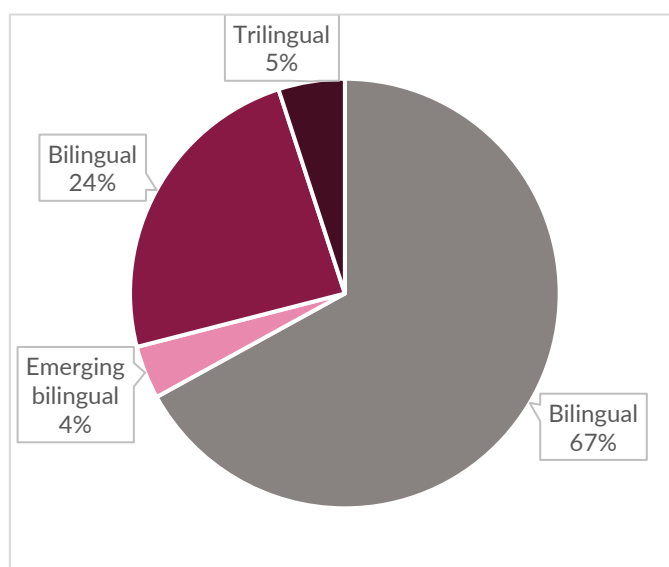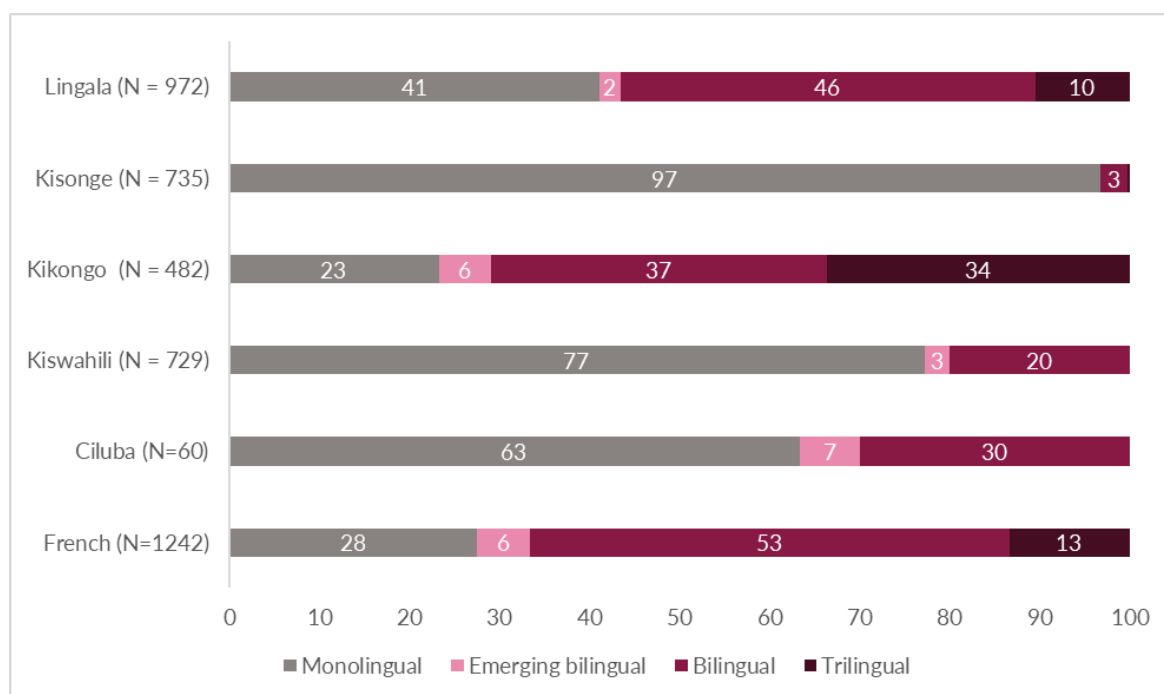

**Figure 2. Multilingual Distribution of Languages**

2

from Haut-Katanga listed the fewest number of languages spoken (4) while those in Kinshasa and Lomami mentioned the widest variety (7 and 6 languages, respectively).

LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION AND LANGUAGE SKILL MATCH

In light of the numerous languages spoken across the DRC, interview and focus group participants discussed several challenges related to the prescribed national languages that schools should use in the early years. First, many children—but not all—claimed to speak and/or learn French outside of school, including some who reported speaking French in preprimary settings. In addition, many children reportedly did not speak the national language, which was the language of instruction, but spoke another local language instead. For example, a school might be in the Ciluba language zone, but the children who attended the school spoke Kisonge or Tshilandé, rather than Ciluba. In such cases, teachers often used Kisonge or Tshilandé as the language of instruction to teach children to read in Ciluba before switching to French.

Quantitative data confirms this; we found that many (52%) Congolese children were taught in a language they did not understand. The main driver of the mismatch between the language of instruction and the languages students understand is from students in Grade 4; language of instruction should switch from a national language to French in Grades 3 and 4, yet, many children do not sufficiently understand French by the time it becomes the language of instruction.

Figure 3. Percentage of Children Who Learn in Languages They Understand, by Language
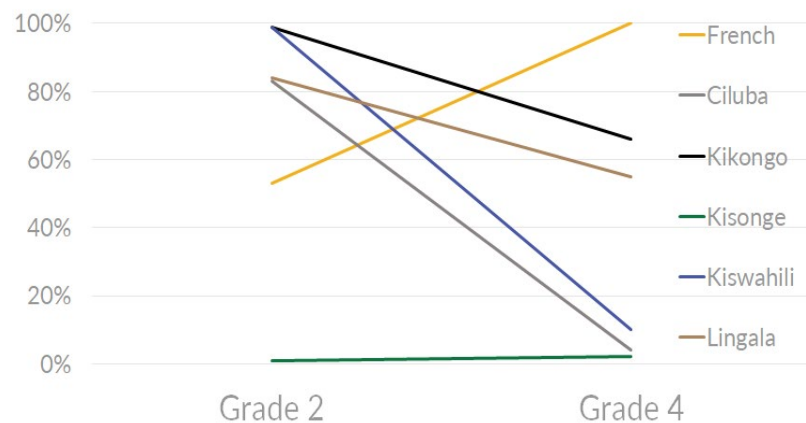
Naturally, monolingual students in Grade 4 were most likely to be taught in a language (French) they did not understand (84 per cent of students in our sample). The mismatch is less pronounced for Grade 2 students as teachers use one of the four national languages for instruction in early grades. However, 53 per cent of monolingual and 64 per cent of emerging bilingual Grade 2 students are not taught in a language they know. Figure 3 shows how the mismatch between children's familiar language and the language of instruction varies depending on the language.

LANGUAGE SKILL THRESHOLDS

Theory suggests that two skills—listening comprehension of an L2 and decoding skills of the mother tongue (L1)—are positively correlated with reading skills in an L2 (French in this case).[ix] In general, we expected to see an increase in a students' ability to decode and read with comprehension in French as their French language comprehension skills improved. We found that this correlation held true for all students in our sample. We then explored whether there was a threshold of decoding in the mother tongue (L1) above which there was a stronger relationship between decoding in the mother tongue and decoding in French (L2). In other words, do children acquire French skills at a far higher rate once they have reached a certain level of decoding skills in their native languages?

We found evidence of a breaking point in French decoding skills for children who have around 12 per cent proficiency in decoding their mother tongue (Figure 4). This suggests that **once children can achieve a score of 12 per cent on decoding tasks in their mother tongue, the transferability of those skills into learning to decode in French increases as a much higher rate.**

Next, we explored whether there is a threshold of French language comprehension above which there is a stronger relationship with decoding in French. In other words, did children acquire French decoding skills at a far higher rate once they had reached a certain level of language comprehension in French? The data suggest that

there is no such threshold for the students who were part of our sample.

TEACHER LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Most of the teachers in our sample indicated that they are comfortable speaking both French and their students' mother tongues. No teachers admitted to having challenges in French, and even teachers who claimed to have a different mother tongue than their students professed that they can speak and understand the language of their students well. Only a few teachers claimed to face language barriers with their students, namely when they taught in multilingual classrooms. Overall, teachers did not indicate any significant challenges with their own language skills.

Figure 4. Relationship between Mother Tongue Decoding and French Decoding Skills


TEACHERS' PRACTICES

Teachers reported using several different approaches to teaching languages in their classrooms. Some teachers mentioned using engaging methods such as stories, songs, or pictures to teach children to read. Yet, many teachers and students noted that French reading instruction begins with letters, sounds, and verb conjugations. Teachers often described teaching French and national languages in tandem; for instance, several teachers described comparing sounds or words between languages or giving children translation assignments. To reinforce reading skills in both targeted languages, teachers often indicating using rote teaching practices such as recitation or memorization.

Teachers reported that in classrooms where students speak multiple languages, learning can be difficult for students who do not speak the language of the majority. In these classrooms, teachers use methods including alternating between French and the prescribed national language, relying on French as a lingua franca, asking multilingual students to translate, and using pictures or gestures to indicate meaning. A few school administrators also indicated that they place students in classrooms with specific teachers who share a common language.

Although they are often finding ways to teach their students in the national languages, **teachers noted a significant need for materials in Congolese languages**. According to survey data, one in three teachers indicated that students in their classroom do not have textbooks in the national language. While schools face additional insufficiencies for French materials, the dearth of resources is more pronounced for materials in national languages. When classrooms do have materials, they are often insufficient. Teachers indicated that the materials are often outdated, irrelevant, overly complicated, and are written in dialects or languages that people in their communities do not speak. One school inspector explained as follows:

> *"With the documents that are there, they are not in the right language. They are in the Kikongo of Bandundu, but for us here in Kongo-Central, our Kikongo is different. This is why sometimes the documents or the books are there, but the language does not correspond, which complicates it a little."*
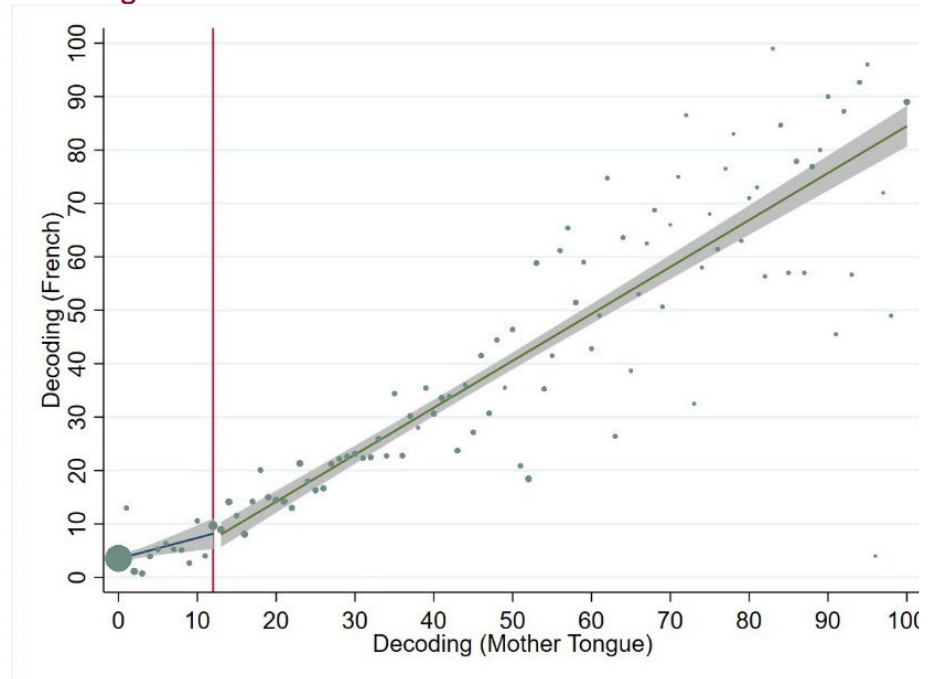
Other educators noted that the existing Congolese language materials do not cover all needed subjects, such as mathematics. Overall, teachers expressed a need for textbooks, alphabet cards, teacher manuals, and other reading materials in Congolese languages in order to teach well.

TEACHERS' ATTITUDES

Teachers in the DRC largely expressed positive views towards the use of Congolese languages in schools. Most claimed that using local languages as the language of instruction helps children to better understand their classroom teaching, facilitates learning of French, leads to improved student outcomes, and, as one teacher also noted, is easier for the teachers as well. Although some teachers did believe that the use of local languages in schools may hinder children's achievement in French, many teachers have seen the positive effects of the mother tongue-based teaching models; students are better able to read and write, and both parents and teachers are happy with students' progress. Nonetheless, while teachers overall supported the country's current language learning policies, it seemed that they might hesitate if policies were to encourage a later transition towards French in the future, considering the crucial importance of French for children's long-term success.

PARENT VIEWS ON LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

Previous research has shown that parents and community members often oppose mother-tongue education policies because they prefer that their children learn in an international language such as French, which is important for future employment. Stakeholders from the Ministry of Education and UNESCO, as well as educational non-governmental organizations that we engaged in the initial phase of our research supported this perception. For example, one respondent from ELAN said, "*Some parents, especially in urban areas, don't want their children to learn in national languages. Whether it is out of prestige or pride, they say that their children cannot study in the national language, and they are opposed to this.*"

It is interesting to note that our qualitative data revealed that most respondents—including parents—claim to support the teaching of local languages in schools and agree with current language learning policies. Many parents stated that learning local and regional languages **helped to improve student comprehension of lessons, eased the transition to French, and led to general positive learning outcomes**. Many parents also indicated the cultural value of learning local Congolese languages. To illustrate, one parent said:

> "*Let them use Swahili first, which the child knows how to write because it is the language that children have grown up with and speak at home. Let them know their language. . . . If the child doesn't understand Swahili, they won't even be able to learn or communicate in French.*"

In general, national-level stakeholders, such as Ministry of Education officials or non-governmental organization partners, believed that parental resistance to local languages policies was a greater issue than parents indicated.

PERCEIVED COSTS

At the same time, interview and focus group participants described several hesitations regarding multilingual education. First, most parents and education officials **maintained the importance of children's learning French.** They attested that local languages had failed to have the widespread utility of international languages like French. Thus, parents, teachers, and school administrators expressed more concern over students' French literacy skills than over their mother-tongue abilities.[40] Some respondents believed that using local languages in schools could hinder children from learning French. However, respondents mentioned this potential drawback less often than they discussed the benefits of local languages for French acquisition.

Other stated drawbacks of multilingual education include the associated **practical challenges of supporting multiple languages within the education system**. As qualitative informants noted, the Congolese education system must also juggle other competing priorities, such as increasing enrolment, supporting teachers, and maintaining school infrastructure. Incorporating local languages into the education system entails many challenges, including navigating the large number of languages and dialects, and accounting for the effort and associated costs required to develop the materials and train teachers across the country in new pedagogies. In general, the primary question among respondents was not whether to use local languages in schools but how to do so.

Recommendations

Based on our research findings, we make the following recommendations:

1. We recommend that education policymakers in the DRC **refine the education policy to account for students' familiar languages at the school level.** To do so, they may draw on language mapping data to select initial language(s) of instruction for schools to avoid circumstances where students are learning in an unfamiliar national language in the early years of schooling.

2. Our qualitative data revealed that one of the most pressing needs for multilingual programming is for further provision of relevant teaching materials in the local languages. Therefore, we recommend **further investment in the development and provision of appropriate local language materials**.

3. Our data show that once children achieve a foundational level of decoding skills in their mother tongue, they can better learn to read in French. Our study also makes the case for continuous emphasis on French oral language instruction beginning in the early grades, considering the strong correlation between French comprehension skills and French decoding skills. **Teacher professional development curricula should be similarly revised to stress the importance of utilizing mother tongue skills in developing *both* mother tongue reading abilities, but also for French reading development**.

4. In cases of linguistically mixed classrooms and classrooms with a large range of student level levels, **there is a need for teachers to make assessment-informed decisions to determine which language(s) are spoken by a majority of their students**. Importantly, teachers should be given several easy-to-use tools and methods to help them support students who may then be in classrooms where they do not speak the language of instruction (i.e., emerging bilinguals whose weaker language is not the language of instruction, or monolinguals in classrooms where their familiar language does not match the language of instruction). These teacher-student scaffolds are critical for supporting all children in the classroom. Participants in our study also recommended formally assessing students on mother tongue literacy to encourage student and parental investment in developing those skills.

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