WHAT IS BIFF AND CHIP IN KOM?

Posted on June 14, 2021 by Eddie

English is the language of incomprehensible content, of punishment for wrong answers, of examinations that determine oneâ€™s future. The mother tongue is the language of home, of play, of comfort and comprehension. When the students begin to interact with a teacher in the mother tongue, they visibly loosen up.
Category: Observations

When I learned to read back in the mid 1960s, the standard reading books were the Janet and John series. The books where wholesome but thoroughly unexciting. "Run, little dog, run", was about as gripping as they ever got. By the time our kids came to read, things had moved on and they learned from the Biff and Chip books. Like the Janet and John books, the Biff and Chip ones started out with a limited vocabulary and built up, but unlike the earlier ones, they were interesting from the start. Not only that, but I'm convinced that Biff and Chip included the odd nod to adults so that teachers and parents stayed engaged with the story telling (the famous bears episode is hilarious).

Specialists and teachers put a vast amount of effort and energy into devising and implementing reading schemes. Literacy is a key skill in our society and not being able to read and write significantly impacts the opportunities that you have in life. However, when I learned to read and my children after me, we had one massive advantage. Yes, we had excellent resources to help us, but we were learning to read in our mother tongue.

Just imagine, if you will, having to learn to read in a language that you barely speak or understand. The idea is unthinkable, but it is the reality for many speakers of minority languages around the globe. Thankfully, things are starting to change - if slowly. This article in the Financial Times explores some of the issues.

> *Godfrey Chuo still remembers the reaction of his primary school students three decades ago when, as a young teacher in north-west Cameroon, he switched from explaining ideas in English â€" the official language of instruction â€" into his mother tongue, of Kom.*
>
> *â€œThe children were so excited and motivated,â€ he says. â€œWhen they are taught in their own language, they work even beyond what the teacher asks. It is fantastic.â€*
>
> *By contrast, Chuo has found that when pupils start learning in a foreign language, their education slows down. â€œThey learn better in their first language, the language of the heart, which is not learnt but inherited from their parents,â€ he finds.*

The issues aren't purely linguistic. Language use speaks to emotional security and safety.

> *As Barbara Trudell, a consultant with SIL, a faith-based non-profit that supported the Kom programme in Cameroon, points out: â€œEnglish is the language of incomprehensible content, of punishment for wrong answers, of examinations that determine oneâ€™s future.*

> *The mother tongue is the language of home, of play, of comfort and comprehension. When the students begin to interact with a teacher in the mother tongue, they visibly loosen up.â€*

The article goes on to give illustrations from a number of countries where early years education in the mother tongue, rather than in a colonial language has led to improved literacy. This is a good thing! If literacy is important for life choices in the West, it is even more the case in developing nations. Higher levels of literacy lead to lower rates of infant mortality, less poverty and higher crop yields. It doesn't solve all problems, but it is a remarkably efficient intervention.

One of the key drivers for mother tongue literacy in some situations is the availability of the Bible in the local language and literacy and translation work often happen hand in hand. However, even where there is no local language Bible, mother tongue literacy is something to be encouraged. Now go away and read the FT article if you haven't already done so!