



Research Article

Educational Language Policy in Angola: Bilingual Education as a Step to Inclusion and Quality

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Abstract

This article analyses educational language policy in Angola, focusing on the dominance of Portuguese as the sole medium of instruction and its implications for learners from national language communities. Grounded in sociolinguistic theory and language policy studies, and based on a documentary analysis of legislation and existing academic research, rather than original fieldwork data, the paper examines the concepts of language, the status of languages in order to understand how institutional choices shape educational access and social inclusion. Particular attention is given to Law No. 32/20, which structures the Angolan education system around a monolingual model that fails to reflect the country's deep linguistic diversity. The study argues that the exclusive use of Portuguese in education reproduces colonial linguistic hierarchies, disadvantages children who enter school speaking national languages, and contributes to patterns of low achievement, school failure, dropout and social exclusion, especially in rural areas. By situating Angola within broader African and post-colonial debates on language, power and identity, the article shows that language-in-education policy is never neutral but plays a central role in either reproducing or challenging inequality. In response to these challenges, the article advocates for the introduction and universalisation of bilingual education, with mother tongues used as media of instruction in the early years of schooling and Portuguese taught as a curricular subject. Such a model, which works in other Portuguese speaking countries like Mozambique, is presented as a realistic and socially just alternative that can enhance comprehension, learning outcomes and learner participation while affirming linguistic and cultural identities. The article concludes by emphasising the central role of teacher education, language planning and political commitment in building a truly inclusive and multilingual education system in Angola.

Keywords

Angola, Educational Language Policy, Bilingual Education, National Languages, Mother-Tongue Education, Multilingualism, Social Inclusion, Language Planning

1. Introduction

A country's education system should promote the inclusion and full participation of learners from all linguistic communities, including those who do not speak the official language. This is only possible through educational language policies that consider not only the social context, but above all the linguistic diversity of

the country.

This article is based on a documentary analysis and policy review of Angola's educational language framework, drawing on national legislation, official policy documents and existing academic research. Rather than original fieldwork data, the

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study critically examines the legal and institutional structures that shape language use in education, in order to assess their implications for educational inclusion and equity.

In Angola, current educational language policies favour a monolingual model that gives primacy to Portuguese as the sole medium of instruction, in line with the Constitution (Government of the Republic of Angola (GRA) [16]) and the law governing the education system (GRA [15]). As a result, thousands of children - particularly in rural and linguistically diverse regions - enter school without speaking the language used in the classroom. This situation has a structurally discriminatory and exclusionary character, as it places national-language speakers at a disadvantage position from the outset, limiting their participation, undermining their right to quality education and restricting their social participation. These conditions contribute directly to low academic achievement, high dropout rates and persistent illiteracy in communities where national languages are dominant.

Against this background, this article analyses the language policies currently in force in Angola and, drawing on existing research and documented educational realities, argues that Angola must rethink its education system. It advocates for the adoption of bilingual education, with mother tongues used as media of instruction in the early years of schooling and Portuguese taught as a curricular subject, as a strategy to unlock learners' potential, promote educational equity and advance meaningful social inclusion (Wiley [31]).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Towards a Definition of Language

In conceptualising language, it is useful to start with the foundational contributions of structuralism and generativism, represented by Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky, respectively. While Saussure perceives language as a socially shared system of signs that makes communication possible [25], Chomsky emphasises the innate human capacity for language, distinguishing between linguistic competence and actual language use [10]. These perspectives established that language is both a social system and a human faculty.

However, for the purposes of understanding language in multilingual and post-colonial societies, these formal and cognitive approaches are insufficient on their own. More recent sociolinguistic and language policy studies have shifted the focus toward the social, political and ideological dimensions of language. Scholars such as Amélia [1], Ball and McIvor [3], Bernardo and Severo [6], Calvet [8], Cook [11], Nascimento [20], Oliveira [22] Ricento [24], Severo [26], Severo [27] and Webb and Sure [30], argue that language is not merely a neutral medium of communication, but a powerful social institution through which knowledge, culture, spirituality and identity are transmitted intergenerationally.

From this perspective, language functions as a marker of belonging and exclusion. The languages people speak — or

are allowed to speak — shape their position in society, their access to education, employment and political participation, and their recognition as legitimate members of the nation. Language thus becomes a form of symbolic capital and a key instrument of power.

In African post-colonial contexts such as Angola, this relationship between language, identity and power is particularly pronounced. Colonial languages such as Portuguese have historically been associated with modernity, authority and social mobility, while indigenous languages have been marginalised and confined to private or informal domains. As a result, language policy is never neutral: it reflects political choices about which identities are valued, which knowledge is legitimised and which citizens are granted full participation in national life. Understanding language in this way is essential for analysing educational language policy and for justifying the introduction of bilingual and mother-tongue-based education in Angola.

2.2. Typologies of Languages and Language Policies in Africa

In analysing language policy in Africa, it is important to distinguish between different categories of languages and their socio-political functions. Calvet proposes a typology that includes official languages, regional official languages, vehicular languages, standardised endogenous languages, everyday community languages and endangered languages [8]. This classification highlights the profound imbalance between the linguistic richness of the continent and the narrow set of languages that receive institutional recognition. While Africa is home to more than 2000 languages, less than 1% have official status, and a large proportion are classified as endangered due to their exclusion from education, administration and public life.

These hierarchies are not accidental but are produced and maintained through language policies. Ndombele [21] and Zau [32] identify three dominant models of language policy in Africa based on the status granted to different languages. The endoglossic model privileges a single official language, usually inherited from the colonial period. The mixoglossic model combines indigenous and foreign languages as official or semi-official. The exoglossic model promotes one or more indigenous languages as the primary official languages of the state. Each model reflects particular ideological choices about national identity, political unity and access to power.

Angola follows an endoglossic model, with Portuguese as the sole official language [16], coexisting with a wide range of indigenous languages that have no official status. This configuration reproduces a colonial linguistic hierarchy in which Portuguese is associated with authority, social status, modernity and access to education, while national languages are largely confined to informal and private domains. As a result, the majority of Angolan children enter school in a language that is not their own, placing them at a structural disadvantage

from the very beginning of their educational trajectory.

Understanding these typologies is crucial for analysing the limitations of current language policy in Angola and for justifying the need for a paradigm shift toward a more inclusive, multilingual and socially just model of education.

2.3. Languages in Angola: Status, Diversity and Colonial Legacy

Languages in Angola have differentiated and hierarchised statuses. Portuguese functions as the sole official language and as the primary trans-ethnic medium of communication, while indigenous languages are classified as national languages. None of these national languages currently fulfils a nationwide communicative role comparable to that of Portuguese, despite being the mother tongues of the majority of the population.

The notion of *national language* is itself problematic. Although only a limited number of languages enjoy institutional recognition, Angola is characterised by extensive linguistic diversity. Estimates of the number of languages spoken in the country range from 9 to more than 40 (Araújo [2]; Baza [4]; Edmundo [13]; GRA [17]; Ndombele [21]; Webb and Sure [30]), depending on classification criteria. These include major Bantu languages such as Umbundo, Kimbundo, Kikongo, Chokwe, Kwanhama and Nhaneka (Severo [27]), as well as minority and non-Bantu languages, including Khoisan varieties. This diversity challenges simplified or politically motivated classifications and highlights the complexity of linguistic realities on the ground.

Historically, colonisation imposed the Portuguese language through an assimilationist education system that actively prohibited the use of indigenous languages in schools and public institutions. Language was used as a tool of cultural domination and social stratification, privileging those who mastered Portuguese while excluding the majority of the population from full participation in colonial society. After independence in 1975, Portuguese was retained as the official language in the name of national unity and administrative efficiency (Fonseca [14]). Although national languages were symbolically recognised as part of Angola's cultural heritage, they remained marginalised within formal education and state institutions.

This historical legacy continues to shape contemporary language policy in Angola (Ponso [23]), producing deep inequalities in access to education, knowledge and social mobility. Understanding this background is essential for analysing current debates about bilingual education and linguistic justice in Angola.

3. Educational Language Policy in Angola

Educational language policy refers to the choices a state

makes regarding the languages used as media of instruction and as curricular subjects within the educational system. Some scholars refer to educational language policy as “language-in-education policy” [3, 5, 19]. In Angola, this policy is formally defined by the Basic Law of Education and Teaching System, which establishes Portuguese as the primary language of instruction, while allowing national languages to be used in a complementary capacity [15].

Although this legal framework acknowledges the existence of linguistic diversity, it effectively institutionalises a monolingual model of schooling. Portuguese remains the sole legitimate language of teaching and learning, while national languages are confined to auxiliary or symbolic roles. This configuration fails to reflect the sociolinguistic realities of most Angolan learners, the majority of whom enter school speaking a national language rather than Portuguese. As a result, the education system operates in a language that is unfamiliar to many pupils, creating structural barriers to comprehension, participation and academic success from the earliest years of schooling.

This policy reproduces colonial linguistic hierarchies by continuing to privilege Portuguese as the language of knowledge, authority and social mobility, while marginalising indigenous languages and their speakers. In practice, it contributes to patterns of school failure, grade repetition and dropout, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas where exposure to Portuguese outside school is limited. Educational language policy thus becomes a mechanism through which broader social inequalities are reproduced.

Although some initiatives have been undertaken to promote national languages — such as the establishment of the Instituto de Línguas Nacionais (ILN), the orthography standardization of some national languages and the introduction of some of those languages in higher education and teacher training — these measures have remained largely peripheral. They have not led to a systematic integration of national languages into basic education as media of instruction, nor have they altered the fundamentally monolingual orientation of the system. Consequently, Angola's current educational language policy continues to fall short of addressing the linguistic rights and learning needs of the majority of its students.

4. Discussion: Bilingual Education as a Strategy for Inclusion

Thousands of Angolan children enter school without speaking Portuguese, which severely compromises their learning and participation in the classroom. In a highly multilingual country such as Angola [26], a monolingual educational model violates learners' right to education in their mother tongue and contributes significantly to school failure, grade repetition and early dropout, particularly in rural and linguistically diverse regions.

This article argues for the introduction and universalisation

of bilingual education, with national languages serving as media of instruction in the early years of schooling and Portuguese taught as a curricular subject. Research in bilingual and mother-tongue-based education (Benson [5]; Bortoni-Ricardo [7]; Chicumba [9]; Cummins [12]; Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh [28]) consistently shows that children learn more effectively when initial literacy and content learning occur in a familiar language. Mother tongue-based education gives teachers and students an opportunity to interact in a natural way and negotiate meanings together, creating an environment conducive to cognitive and linguistic development [5].

In the Angolan context, such a model would not only improve comprehension and cognitive development, but also increase school retention, learner motivation and community engagement, while affirming cultural and linguistic identity.

Evidence from neighbouring countries demonstrates the feasibility and educational benefits of this approach in multilingual contexts. For example, Mozambique has implemented bilingual education programmes in which some indigenous languages such as Emakhuwa, Xichangana and Elomwe are used alongside Portuguese in the early grades (UNESCO [29]; Heugh [18]). Evaluations of these programmes have shown that learners exposed to mother-tongue instruction in early schooling achieve stronger literacy outcomes and greater overall participation than peers in monolingual settings (Kosonen & Benson [19]). These Mozambican experiences offer valuable lessons for Angola, particularly in curriculum design, teacher preparation and material development, showing that bilingual models can be successfully adapted to the realities of Portuguese-Speaking African Countries (PALOPs).

Despite this promise, implementing bilingual education in Angola faces significant practical challenges. One major issue concerns the standardisation of orthographies for national languages. Although several Angolan languages have written traditions and orthographic proposals, these are not always harmonised or widely disseminated, complicating the production of textbooks, teaching materials and assessment tools. Effective bilingual education therefore requires sustained investment in linguistic planning, including codification, standardisation and official recognition of national language writing systems.

A second challenge relates to financial and institutional capacity. Developing curricula, textbooks, teacher guides and literacy materials in multiple languages demands additional resources. It also requires decentralised planning to align language choices with local sociolinguistic realities. In contexts of limited educational budgets, these costs are often viewed as barriers. However, evidence suggests that the long-term economic and social costs of maintaining a monolingual system — including repetition, dropout and educational failure — outweigh the investments needed for multilingual education [28].

Teacher education is perhaps the most critical factor in the success of bilingual education. Teachers must be trained not only to teach national languages as subjects, but also to use

them as languages of instruction in mathematics, science and other curricular areas. This requires teacher-training curricula that incorporate bilingual pedagogies, targeted in-service professional development, and recruitment strategies for teachers proficient in local languages. Without well-prepared teachers, bilingual education risks becoming symbolic rather than pedagogically effective.

In this sense, bilingual education should be understood not as a simple technical reform, but as a broader project of educational justice and linguistic decolonisation. Its success depends on coherent language-in-education planning, political commitment and sustained investment in teachers, materials and institutional structures. Drawing on successful regional experiences such as Mozambique's bilingual programmes, Angola can realistically pursue a shift toward a more inclusive, equitable and qualitative education system.

5. Conclusions

Educational language policy in Angola, as currently framed by Law No. 32/20, sustains a fundamentally monolingual education system that fails to reflect the country's profound linguistic diversity and continues to marginalise speakers of national languages. By enforcing Portuguese as the exclusive medium of instruction, the system reproduces colonial linguistic hierarchies and systematically disadvantages the majority of learners who enter school with limited or no proficiency in that language. This situation undermines not only learners' right to equitable and quality education, but also their right to full social, cultural and political inclusion.

This study argues that a meaningful transformation of Angola's education system requires a decisive shift toward bilingual and mother tongue-based education. Introducing national languages as media of instruction in the early years of schooling, alongside Portuguese as a curricular subject, would align educational practice with the country's sociolinguistic realities. Such a model would enhance comprehension, improve learning outcomes, reduce dropout rates and promote greater equity between urban and rural learners.

Beyond its pedagogical benefits, bilingual education represents a broader project of linguistic justice and democratic participation. Recognising national languages as legitimate languages of schooling affirms the cultural identities of learners and communities, challenges inherited colonial hierarchies, and strengthens the foundations of a more inclusive nation-state. Experiences from neighbouring countries demonstrate that such models are not only desirable, but also feasible when supported by coherent language planning, teacher education and political commitment.

For these reasons, Angola is urged to move beyond symbolic recognition of linguistic diversity and to implement a comprehensive, well-resourced bilingual education policy. Only through such a reform can the country build a truly multilingual, democratic and socially just education system capable of serving all its citizens.

Abbreviations

ILN	Instituto de Línguas Nacionais [Institute of National Languages]
GRA	Governo da República de Angola [Government of the Republic of Angola]
PALOP	Países Africanos de Língua Portuguesa [Portuguese-Speaking African Countries]

Author Contributions

Francisco Edmundo is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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