Towards Using Multiple Languages of Instruction to Enhance Comprehension andParticipation in Linguistically Diverse Schools in Uganda.

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Abstract

Primary schools in Uganda have to choose one medium of instruction (MOI) to be used by teachers in the lower primary classes under a Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MT-MLE) model. The national Language of Instruction (LOI) policy requires all schools to choose between a familiar indigenous language and English (the second language) except those in urban areas that may use English right from the start. This paper discusses how choice and use of the languages chosen as MOI impacts on the level of learner comprehension and participation. The objective of this paper is to investigate the degree of learner participation when different MOI types are used for instruction. A qualitative approach was used to collect and analyse data from participants in purposively selected case schools. Data were generated and collected, using lesson observation and documentary analysis from lower primary classes in purposively selected schools located in linguistically diverse communities. Analysis of data was done and the findings indicate that effective learner participation varies with the degree of familiarity of the language(s) used as MOI to the pupils. The paper makes recommendations on how effective learner participation can be realised using different combinations of pedagogical practices and MOI choices under the prevailing LIE policy.

Key words: Learner participation, Medium of Instruction, Pedagogical Practice, Language of Instruction, National Language Policy

1.0 Introduction

Despite deliberate efforts by the government of Uganda to regulate language use in education by adopting an official language of instruction (LOI) policy, language is still a major challenge in equitable education access and transition. Speakers of non-majority languages as their first languages, as is typical of many children in multilingual communities, have problems with

participating in learning during the early years of primary education. Recently a number of interventions on the use of indigenous languages in schools, for example through provision of reading materials, like Literacy Achievement and Retention Ability (LARA) and Early Grade Reading (EGR), have been introduced but they address only reading in a familiar language without paying attention to the continued use of such languages as medium of instruction (MOI). The choice of MOI is at school level and it is a long term decision that is not frequently revised. Implementation of the choice by teachers is not informed by any guidelines on matching the different language choices to appropriate pedagogical practices as it is in other countries (Traore, 2001). Right from training, teachers are not introduced to how to use a given MOI category entails adjustments in the pedagogical practices. In some countries the use of MT-MLE models is characterised by use of specialised pedagogy.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The use of languages chosen as MOI in areas where the populations are ethnically and/or linguistically diverse is a problematic issue. In urban and peri-urban areas, many children acquire the languages used by their parents and peers in the immediate environments as their first languages. For the majority of citizens, English is not one of the languages used at home, at work, or in their social circles. Even in rural settings where the use of indigenous languages is recommended by the policy for being majority languages, linguistically diverse areas have significant communities of speakers of different indigenous languages that may not be highly intelligible with the majority one. The use any single indigenous language chosen as MOI usually marginalises the comprehension and participation of those learners, and even limits the eloquence of some teachers, for whom that language is not familiar. Whereas the choice of L_2 as MOI is based on its presumed neutrality, the lower primary class pupils for whom it is familiar may be the minority. Therefore, the choice of any one language, whether mother tongue or L_2, only serves to make its selection appear democratic and to ease work for the teachers. For as long as choice of MOI and use of pedagogical practices are viewed from the point of basically easing the teachers' work, learning will remain passive attendance especially for those to whom the medium of instruction is unfamiliar. This is often the case where only one language is used and teachers cannot adopt the kinds of pedagogical practices that can cater for the involvement of all learners.

Based on research that set out to investigate the factors influencing choice and use of media of instruction by schools in linguistically diverse communities, this paper investigates the effectiveness of using the different MOI categories for instruction. This paper focuses on answering the following questions:

1.   What Factors Make the Chosen MOI Enhance Learner Participation?
2.   Does the chosen MOI Always Promote Learner Participation?
3.   Does the Use of Multiple Languages as MOI Improve Learner Participation?

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by two theories for cross validation and to enhance the confidence ofthe findings. This triangulation of theory was intended to counter any potential shortcomings of using only one theory and to make the findings more comprehensive. The two theories used are Socio-cultural Theory and Critical Theory.

The theory of learning that informed this study is Socio-cultural Theory (SCT) developed by Lev Vygotsky (1962). This theory emphasises interdependence of social and individual processes in the construction of knowledge (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). According to this theory learning occurs in a zone of proximal development (ZPD) whose borders are what learners can do without help and what they can do with support from a knowledgeable 'other' through language-mediated social interaction (Lantolf, 2000). Among the principles of socio-cultural theory is that learning is through interaction within a social context. Vygotsky asserts that the interaction must be linguistically accessible to learners and relevant to learning.

The theory of society that underpins this study is Critical Theory developed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Ardono (1982) (both members of the Frankfurt School of Social Research). Individuals and communities are in constant competition for the limited resources and opportunities; and language is a factor in how social institutions, including the school, support the perpetual duplication of power relations (Johnson, 2006). Therefore, the school can and should be one of the sites for transformation of the education system and, eventually, society.

2.0 Literature Review

There are various definitions of multilingual education (MLE), they include "developing the first language and adding a second language", "schooling which begins in the mother tongue and transitions to additional languages", "learning to read and write …and teaching subjects in L_1" and "use of the students' mother tongue and two or more languages as languages of instruction" (Chumbow, 2013). All these definitions involve mother tongue/first language not as a category but as one entity that is objective and equally legible for all pupils in a given class. Hence, the basic premise in MLE does not hold for linguistically diverse contexts. In linguistically diverse classes, the salient and typical benefits of studying in a mother tongue apply only to those for whom the specific language is familiar

The development of language by children, especially vocabulary, depends on the degree of exposure to it. Vocabulary is very basic for comprehension (Christ & Wang, 2010) and this holds even where literacy is not (yet) part of the language ability required.

In linguistically diverse communities, the pupils' familiarity with the different languages is not uniform and the widest difference is in second language (L_2) for which exposure is a function of socio-economic status (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Whereas early exposure to L_2 may be advantageous for its acquisition, the kind of competence developed through acquisition resulting from informal exposure is not adequate for using the language as a medium of learning (Cummins,

2000). In schools where the selection of any language as MOI is on the basis of the language being a 'neutral' or 'majority' one, the focus tends to be more on teachers' convenience in presenting the learning content than on the ability of individual learners to comprehend and participate in learning. Even children living in homes where the adults know the language selected as MOI will acquire it only to the extent that the adults have time available for familial interaction and the quality or variety of language used at home. It is only when such cultural capital of the parents is transmitted to the family that children may use it for building their own social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 2004). Hence, the fact that parents know the majority or neutral language chosen as MOI does not guarantee the children's exposure to and familiarity with that language and may be invalid as the basis for its choice for use as MOI.

3.0 Research Methodology and Design

The study adopted a qualitative multiple case study design in order to gain in-depth understanding of a wide variety of subjective realities as constructed and interpreted for meaning by the participants. The participants constituted part of the natural setting and the object of observation.

Data was generated and collected using observation guide and document analysis. The study population comprised head teachers, teachers and pupils in the lower primary section in the case schools located in linguistically diverse areas. A total of eight case schools, both day and boarding, were purposively selected from both rural and urban communities in areas of Lyantonde and Tororo.

The instruments were first piloted on samples from populations that had similar characteristics to those of the study population. The observations were subjected to method triangulation and participant triangulation (Walliman & Buckler, 2008) to establish their trustworthiness and consistence respectively. All the data collected was transcribed before being subjected to content analysis procedures. The data was then interpreted for emerging themes and accordingly categorised on the basis of the study variables.

4.0 Findings of the Study

The paper set out to answer three questions related to MOI choice and learner participation. The summaries of findings are presented according to the questions raised in the problem statement.

4.1 What Factors Make the Chosen MOI Enhance Learner Participation?

Findings from observation of classroom procedures revealed that learner participation was greater in classes where the languages chosen as MOI were familiar to the pupils. It was even much greater and more widespread in classes where the language chosen as MOI was familiar to the majority of the pupils. The choice of indigenous languages, more observed in linguistically homogeneous rural areas, led to increased oral learner participation. In urban areas the choice of second language led to comparatively more inclusive participation in terms of reception of instruction but with limited comprehension and less enthusiastic oral learner response.

Another factor that was found to enhance learner participation was the pedagogical practices used. The pedagogical practices used with the two MOI categories were basically the same as there was no provision during training for use of different languages for instruction. The teachers who used indigenous languages simply translated whatever pedagogies they learned in and to use with L_2 into other languages. The teachers' exploitation of such pedagogies in languages other than L_2 varied only with the choice of other language and the teachers' personal fluency in the language involved. Exploitation of the practices partly depended on the attitude of the teacher (or the school) towards how strictly the school's officially chosen MOI has to be followed and the teachers' personal levels of multilingualism in the relevant languages.

The most commonly used practices were the question and answer (Q&A) method and exposition. In all classes Q&A was used, learner participation varied with the extent to which the medium used was a familiar language. Where the language was familiar, questions by the teacher were answered by those to whom the language was familiar and the pupils themselves asked questions, some which were answered by other pupils. Where the MOI was an indigenous language, common expressions from L_2 were used with the main medium and accepted by the teacher. But where the chosen MOI was L_2, the use of expressions from any of the other languages were sometimes discouraged even if clear to many of the learners or even the teacher. The use of exposition as a pedagogical practice in a language different from the one in which the content was accessed by the teacher was noted to be more demanding. Unlike Question and Answer, the teacher needed to translate the content and organise it into a coherent and continuous discourse before presenting it to the class. Even where the teacher's presentation was alright, the individual pupils' capacity to receive and retain sustained discourse for later analysis and participation was partly influenced by their levels of fluency in the specific language. Exposition was more successful for teachers where the content was in the original language, for pupils for whom the chosen MOI was familiar and the discourse not very long. But Question and Answer was comparatively easier to use for pupils and teachers even with a less familiar language as the discourse was divided into manageable chunks for immediate participation.

Another practice that was used in both second language and indigenous language-medium classes as a method of exposing learning content by the teacher was explanation. In several instances, teachers who used detailed explanation with an indigenous language mixed its use with L_2. In some L_2 medium-classes, the use of expressions from other languages was sometimes due to the teacher's inability to explain a given idea in L_2. Its use with MT/LL by teachers who are not fluent necessitated code-mixing with L_2; and this helped all learners for whom the chosen language alone was not clear enough. The code-mixing made it possible for more pupils to participate.

The use of explanation in L_2-medium classes was characterised by teachers paraphrasing or repeating but the intended clarification was still beneficial to only those same pupils for whom L_2 was familiar. But there were also instances where the teacher did not give adequate explanation and the pupils did not ask questions. The use of explanation in indigenous languages as media of

instruction was characterised by borrowing from L_2 by teachers and translations across indigenous languages by bilingual pupils.

There was also use of demonstration. It was observed that its use with familiar languages enhanced pupils' participation through repeating the demonstrated activity. The use of practices related to demonstration made some of the learners to whom the chosen medium was unfamiliar imitate actions and/or words which they did not attach any meaning to. Apart from physical disciplines where response was basically bodily, cognitive and affective disciplines required comprehension for the demonstration of action to be relevant to learning to be assimilated.

Demonstration was one the popular practices in the lower primary section. It was noted that its use encouraged learner involvement as it involved pupils repeating what they heard being said and/or what they saw being done. For demonstration-related practices to be effective, it was necessary for the learners to understand the verbal meaning and use of the learning content involved and this required learning through meaningful and interactive participation. Mechanistic learner involvement, without cognitive analysis of learning input, does not contribute to knowledge generation as intellectual participation does.

4.2 Does the chosen MOI Always Promote Learner Participation?

The extent to which the official MOI promoted aggregate class participation varied with the proportion of pupils in the class for whom the specific chosen language was familiar. It was noted that indigenous languages promoted greater individual and aggregate class participation in classes in linguistically homogeneous rural locations and in linguistically diverse locations where the majority languages were highly intelligible and hence comprehensible to the majority. For schools in linguistically diverse areas, choice of second language promoted more aggregate productive learner involvement in scattered groups of pupils. In one L_2-medium class in a rural school, pupils sharing a common indigenous language preferred to sit together and there was no concentration of pupils on the basis of L_2 ability. In L_2-medium classes, oral verbal participation was choral and sluggish; and pupils were not allowed to speak out in any language other than the official MOI. In indigenous language-medium classes, the use of L_2 was open and initiated by teachers partly to explain to those for whom the official MOI was unfamiliar and partly to cover up for its insufficiency in some learning content areas. In linguistically diverse classes, the limitations of using an unfamiliar language applied to both L_2 and any of indigenous languages chosen as MOI, with difference arising only from what was more comprehensible to more pupils in the different classes. Generally, the limitations of using the official MOI was more in rural L_2-medium classes and in peri-urban indigenous language-medium classes.

The choice of MOI, between L_2 and an indigenous language, affected learner participation depending on how familiar the language was to the learners. Participation in content-related oral-aural activities where response was through or addressed the teacher was dominated by those who put up their hands first. It was only in reading-writing activities where all pupils had equal chances of participation and often pupils' exercise/note books were collected for marking. Blackboard- and

paper-based written activities were mainly in the official medium of instruction; even where it was an indigenous language, apart from technical terms and untranslatable content words which were borrowed into the indigenous languages.

Learners' oral participation was greater where the MOI was familiar. Chorus repetition tended to become louder as more pupils joined but still some lagged behind and with longer utterances the chorus became a bit sluggish for those to whom the language was less familiar. This showed that no matter what the medium was there were always some individuals who just followed mechanistically. As expected, teachers' oral instruction was more comprehensible to learners for whom the medium was familiar and they exhibited more participation.

4.3 Does the Use of Multiple Languages as MOI Improve Learner Participation?

Strict use of only the official MOI selected by the school limited the extent of learner participation according to the proportion of pupils to whom it was familiar. The use of other languages in addition to the official selected language, even if only amongst pupils, improved learner participation. In multiple-medium classes, pupil activity progressively shifted from teacher-centred dispensing of information to learning-centred construction and mutual sharing of ideas as originally conceived by individual pupils as the lesson progresses.

The use of other languages in combination with the official MOI was observed to increase learner participation. The use of second language in classes where the official MOI was an indigenous language was more frequent than the use of indigenous languages in classes where the official MOI was second language. The use of second language in indigenous language-medium classes eased naming of content elements and hence, served as a basis for note-making/taking. The use of multiple languages was mainly observed used by teachers in peri-urban classes with enrolment from different language background communities. Rural classes characteristically mixed only two languages (L_2 and one indigenous language) irrespective of which the official MOI was as linguistic diversity was less than in urban areas. Peri-urban classes mixed more than two languages (L_2 as the official language and one or more indigenous ones). The use of more than one indigenous language was observed in areas where the major indigenous languages were not highly intelligible and where the linguistic diversity was great. Urban classes typically used one language and, in all cases, it was L_2 given the extent of linguistic diversity, the higher socio-economic background and the fact that all pupils had attended nursery school. Apart from the two languages (L_2 and the majority indigenous language) in which most teachers were bilingual to varying degrees, the languages were used among pupils who speak them when translating across each such language and L_2. The use of indigenous languages, though generally discouraged and less frequent among teachers in second language-medium classes, was observed to promote enthusiasm and interaction among pupils for whom the specific language was comprehensible. This led to enhanced comprehension and learner participation during and after the lessons. It is unfortunate that the use of multiple languages is intended to be transitory and must end as early as the second language is mastered or must takeover according to policy.

In classes that used only one language, the pupils to whom the language was familiar were the first to implement the teachers' instructions. In indigenous language-medium classes, the use of technical words related to the learning content and operations made it justified for teachers to use other borrowed words from L_2. In L_2 medium classes the neutrality of the language and its self-sufficiency in vocabulary made it less necessary and very rare for teachers to use any of the other languages. Generally, teachers in schools that chose L_2 used one language in comparison to teachers in schools that chose indigenous language who used at least one other language (usually L_2 or a more dominant indigenous language) in addition to chosen language.

In all L_2-medium classes, teachers' oral communication, whether directed to the whole class or to a specified individual pupil, was mainly in one language. In some instances, pupils had to be exhorted to give a response and the feedback was often strained. In classes where the medium was a local language, teachers' oral communication was in both the local language and L_2. Second language was used when teachers were addressing individuals who were known not to be familiar with the language. But oral communication amongst pupils was largely in more than one language; sometimes languages were mixed by the same pupil and sometimes one of the pupils involved used L_2 when others used different languages.

In classes where multiple languages were used, more learners were attentive even at times when the language being used by the teacher was the unfamiliar or less familiar one. Perhaps the attentiveness observed was based on hope of collaborating what was being said and done by the teacher to what had already been or would shortly be done in a familiar language.

Document analysis revealed that all language-based reading and writing activities were in one language — the second language. The notes and exercises in the pupils' books, the charts displayed in the classrooms and the teachers' illustrations on the blackboard were mostly in L_2 except for indigenous language as a subject of instruction.

4.4 Discussion of the Findings

The finding on what MOI type promoted optimum learner participation; the finding was that familiarity of media of instruction promoted cognitive and pedagogically useful interaction as advanced by Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2006. The neutrality of L_2 does not always correlate with its familiarity to all learners. In some cases, the pupils for whom the neutral L_2 was unfamiliar outnumbered those for whom it is familiar. But there was a tendency by teachers to use only the official chosen medium of instruction, especially the second language, even where/when it was clear from the class proceedings that the use of one or more other languages was possible, desirable and would be profitable.

The use of code mixing and borrowing across the official chosen medium and other languages by teachers in officially L_2-medium classes was sometimes as a result of teachers' dissatisfaction with their own explanation rather than the pupils' inability to comprehend the explanation. But pupils are less likely to initiate the use any other language to the teacher in L_2-medium classes because they

feared being reprimanded and this limited their participation. But the quantity and quality of oral learner participation in L_2-medium classes were generally lower compared to indigenous- and multiple-medium classes especially in rural-located and low socio-economic status schools. This is in agreement with Dutcher, (2001), in recognising that L_2 poses a greater barrier to learners from poor setting than to those from rich ones. Uganda being linguistically and socio-economically diverse needs to have provisions in the language of education policy that allow adoption and adaptation of indigenous language-based multilingual models (Wodon & Cosentino, 2019).

The use of multiple languages during classroom instruction has a way of increasing comprehension by balancing naming of entities and conceptualisation of their meanings, uses, and relationships with each other. Word problems in mathematics, for example, are easily turned into equations by pupils who have conceptualised, through discussion in a familiar language, the numerical values, operations, and relationships represented by the verbal expressions. The use of multiple languages is becoming increasingly popular in linguistically diverse contexts (Honeyman, 2015)

The strict use of only the official chosen medium of instruction, especially in L_2 only-medium classes, limited learner participation. The limitation affected not only those for whom the official medium was unfamiliar but even those for whom it was familiar as the number of mentally active participants and the range of experiences were reduced. Generally, pupils to whom the single language of instruction was unfamiliar or difficult showed signs of boredom or even resignation and were prone to distraction by anything within sight or hearing.

5.0 Conclusion

The study set out to investigate the levels of learner participation in classes using L_2 and other (indigenous) languages as media of instruction with the same professed pedagogies. It focused on how different MOI choices, of L_2 and indigenous languages, promote learner participation, whether the use of the official MOI always promotes optimum learner participation and whether the use of some other language(s) together with the official MOI improves learner participation.

The conclusion, based on the findings, is that inter-learner participation is higher in classes where the language chosen as MOI is familiar to the majority of pupils and in classes where multiple languages are used for instruction. Bi/multilingual-medium classes are more inclusive and participatory than monolingual-medium ones, whether using a second or any of the indigenous languages as the official MOI. Since any one language chosen as medium of instruction is unfamiliar to some, using multiple media is the way to involve more pupils to the benefit of individual learners and the whole class. The use of other languages in addition to the official choice language arises from the need for clarity of communication between the teacher and the learners and amongst learners. The status of the language in terms of being the majority or neutral language does not in itself promote learner participation/involvement where the number of class members to whom it is usable is small or the fluency of the learners in it is not sufficient for learning interaction.

5.1 Recommendations

Parents, teachers, school proprietors and the general public need to be sensitised on the benefits of using multiple familiar languages for learner comprehension (McIlwraith, 2013).

It is recommended that government enacts legislation concerning the use of multiple indigenous languages in specific areas and situations during the pre-exit years in the MT-MLE model.

Each of the indigenous languages identified for use as MOI should have curriculum developed for teacher education at early childhood education and lower primary education levels as it is with Kiswahili in Kenya (Kenya Institute of Education, 1986; Kenya National Examinations Council, 2007).

Even before effecting the much-needed change from an early- to a late-exit or additive policy (Rubagumya, 1990); (Trappes-Lomax, 1990), there is urgent need to embrace the use of more than one language as complementary media of instruction for better and numerically increased participation. Policy makers and the members of authorities responsible for choosing media of instruction for schools should consider choosing and using multiple languages of instruction primarily for enhancing individual learner comprehension and inter-learner discussion instead of aiming at easing one-way mass communication for teachers.

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