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Choice of Media of Instruction by Schools in Linguistically Diverse Areas in Uganda

Muhammed Nyanzi-Kabanda

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Curriculum Instruction and Educational Media,
School of Education, Moi University, Kenya

Carolyn Omulando

Dean, School of Education and Social Sciences, Alupe University, Kenya

Peter L. Barasa

Professor, School of Education, Moi University, Kenya

Abstract:

The Language of Instruction (LIE) Policy in Uganda allows schools to choose the media of instruction (MOI) during the first four years of primary education. The policy provides that English should be used right from P1 only in the urban areas and indigenous languages be used elsewhere. In practice, many schools, including peri-urban and even rural ones, opt for English right from P1 or stop using the indigenous languages earlier than stipulated by the policy. This article identifies and evaluates the reasons for the choice of MOI by schools. A qualitative approach was used to collect and analyse data from participants in purposively selected case schools. The identified reasons for the choice of MOI were informed by an interest in easing the teachers' work and improving the schools' general performance rather than enhancing individual learner comprehension for content assimilation. Recommendations are made for reviewing policy, changing teachers' attitudes toward using indigenous languages, and embracing multilingualism as a tool for achieving interactive comprehension-based learning.

Keywords: Medium of instruction, language policy, indigenous language, linguistic diversity, language of instruction

1. Introduction

Despite the overwhelming research-based literature on the viability of using familiar languages as a medium of instruction (MOI) (for example, Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2006; Brock-Utne & Alidou, 2011) and the freedom given by the MT-MLE policy models, an ever-increasing number of schools in Africa are moving away from using indigenous languages towards second languages that are less familiar to most learners and even some teachers. In an attempt to improve academic performance and levels of learning, some learning situations end up with decreased levels of learning comprehension, retention, and application of learning content.

Whereas the national Language of Instruction (LOI) policy in Uganda provides for the use of indigenous languages as (MOI) up to P4, many schools prefer to use a second language (L₂) as the medium of instruction right from the beginning of the primary school cycle.

This article identifies the languages chosen as MOI. It critiques the justification for the choice of languages declared as MOI by schools and the credibility of the policy that provides for the choice. It is argued that the criteria for the choice of MOI are based on reasons that are not primarily pertinent to promoting the assimilation of learning content by individuals but to boosting the aggregate performance of schools in national examinations. Parents assume that choosing a school that teaches through a given language is the single most important factor in pupils' academic success (Bamgbose, 2000). School proprietors and teachers, in turn, choose languages that are likely to attract the approval of the economically dominant class. Using any language in a linguistically diverse class inevitably excludes those unfamiliar with the chosen language. Learners for whom the chosen medium is unfamiliar tend to have very poor academic achievement and high repetition and drop-out rates (Clegg J., 2005). The question to be answered is, 'why is L₂ or any of the various indigenous languages chosen as MOI by different schools?' Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate the reasons for the choice of different languages as MOI by schools.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

In linguistically diverse communities, the choice of language to use as MOI in the lower primary school classes is difficult. Pupils in the early years of childhood are usually monolingual speakers of their mother tongue, but schools enroll learners from homes and communities that use different languages. The choice of language for use as MOI at the school level is sometimes influenced by factors marginal to learning communication. Such factors include patterns of adult

language used in public places and the demographic and spatial distribution of the languages involved. Another factor is related to the location of the school within a given geo-political administration unit and in terms of rural-urban settings.

Based on the stated problem, the current research set out to establish the factors influencing the choice and use of MOI by schools in linguistically diverse communities. This paper discusses the rationale for choosing different languages for use as MOI in lower primary classes by school head teachers. The paper poses the following questions to be answered:

- What are the reasons for choosing each of the MOI types?
- Where do the reasons include learning communication, and how is it ranked relative to the other(s)?

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The theories underpinning this study were the Socio-cultural Theory of learning (SCT) and the Critical Theory of society. The two theories were used for purposes of cross-validation to enhance confidence in a study by widening and deepening the findings. This use of theory triangulation was used to overcome any limitations or biases inherent in using a single-theory approach.

Socio-cultural theory, developed by Lev Vygotsky, recognizes the role played by culturally constructed artifacts, for example, language and social interaction, in organizing human thinking (Vygotsky, 1962). New knowledge is jointly constructed between the teacher and the learners through collaborative activity in a common language medium (Lantolf, 2000). The ability of individual learners to engage in collaborative activity for constructing knowledge is a function of how familiar the medium of instruction is to each of them.

The critical theory of society was developed by members of the Frankfurt School led by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1982). According to Critical Theory, individuals, groups, and social structures conflict as they compete for scarce resources. Those with power influence social life, and the education system perpetuates the status quo by reproducing generations of conflicting groups. Classed social activity simultaneously reflects, creates, and recreates historically situated ways of knowing material conditions. Language is implicated in how social class is constructed and reconstructed (Johnson, 2006). The fact that urban-located and high socio-economic status schools use L₂ as MOI and perform well and lead parents and teachers to think that the good performance is solely and directly a result of using L₂. To compete favourably in national examinations, many schools choose L₂ regardless of their location and the socio-economic status of the communities they serve.

2. Literature Review

Many independent African states are former colonies whose education systems started during the colonial era. However, again, these countries have linguistically diverse populations (Ouane & Glanz, 2011). Hence, the focus on Uganda is not because it has unique challenges but rather because the choice and use of the language of instruction is context-based and determined by socio-cultural factors.

Several studies, including those by international agencies, emphasize the relationship between familiarity with MOI and learning success. In some countries where MT-MLE programmes are used, the choice of indigenous languages as MOI before switching over to L₂ is handled at a regional or national level and not at the school level (UNICEF, 2016), (Clegg J., 2005). In Uganda, the choice of medium of instruction is at the school level, and the highest administrative level involved is the district, where the District Language Boards are just notified of the choices made (Ward, Penny, & Read, 2006). Using policies recognizing multilingualism benefits pupils by sharpening the mind, increasing networking skills, improving working memory, and generally making learning easy (Onyeije, 2021).

Almost all African countries share a similar background in terms of:

- The history of colonization,
- Multilingualism,
- High illiteracy levels, and
- The need for national integration and development (Bamgbose, 2000; Ekkhard, 2011)

Up to today, many independent African countries are still struggling to break away from the 'status quo maintenance syndrome' (Alexander, 1999).

The fact that the challenges faced by independent African countries are similar does not mean that all countries should adopt similar approaches to language policy formulation. There is a need for each country to develop a national language-in-education policy relevant to its unique socio-culturally situated factors.

In Tanzania, Kiswahili is the national language and is also widely used in education (Telli, 2014). In Kenya, the national language policy mandates the use of the languages of the catchment area as MOI in lower primary school classes (UNICEF, 2016).

Rwanda, generally, does not have indigenous language diversity issues, as over 90% of the population speaks the same language (Kinyarwanda). Formerly a Francophone country, Rwanda switched to Anglophone and today has three official languages; French, English, and Kinyarwanda, which is the national language.

In Ethiopia, the country has 10 regions, of which 3 use the mother tongue as MOI and 7 partly use English (Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2006). The handling of choice at the regional level suggests that the focus is on the familiarity of the language to the majority of citizens in the immediate locality.

In Mali, as regards the language of education policy, there are two types of schools: French-based regular schools and bilingual schools of convergent pedagogies (Traore, 2001). This distinction between French monolingual schools and bilingual schools of convergent pedagogies implies that:

- The choice of MOI is based on the pupils' familiarity with the chosen language(s), and
- This is emphasized by the pedagogical adjustment in bilingual schools

In Ghana, the language of instruction (LOI) policy has changed twice since independence, from an early-exit bilingual policy to an English-only policy in 2002 and later back to a bilingual one (Wilmont, 2003) (Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2006).

The need for revising the language of instruction policies becomes clearer when learning is viewed as a process involving both comprehension and sharing of messages meant to transmit knowledge and promote communication skills for living in a changing world. Unlike Kenya and Tanzania, which have Kiswahili as a national language of wider communication, Uganda does not have such a language. Moreover, unlike Ethiopia, which has a federal system of government and education, Uganda has centralized systems. Rwanda is linguistically less diverse than Uganda, but Rwanda is consciously charting out the most relevant LOI policy to follow. With a centralized education system, high linguistic diversity, and lack of a national language of wider communication in Uganda, there is a need to examine the language choices made by schools and why to inform policy review.

3. Research Methodology and Design

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

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

The data collection instruments were piloted on samples from populations with similar characteristics to the areas of study. Design and methodology similar to those of the actual study were employed. The observations were subjected to method triangulation and participant triangulation (Walliman & Buckler, 2008) to establish their trustworthiness and consistency, respectively. All the data collected were transcribed and subjected to content analysis procedures, thematically considered and interpreted for emerging themes, and accordingly categorized based on the main study variables.

4. Findings of the Study

Findings from the interview with head teachers of the case schools showed the languages the schools used as media of instruction and the reasons for the choice of those languages.

From the study, out of the 8 head teachers interviewed, 4 said their schools chose L₂ as MOI, and 4 said their schools chose the MOI from the MT/LL category. Out of the 4 schools that chose L₂, 3 were urban, and 1 was rural; and out of the 4 schools that MT/LL, 3 were rural, and 1 was urban.

The reasons given for the choice of both categories of language did not vary with rural/urban location. The reasons given by head teachers of schools that chose L₂ included its neutrality, assumed academic advantage, and greater availability of trained staff and teaching and learning reference materials. The reasons for choosing languages from the MT/LL category included the languages being socially and/or demographically dominant, being symbols of cultural identity, and having high mutual intelligibility.

In particular, one head teacher of a school that uses L₂ said:

'We use English because the school is located in an urban area which is also multi-ethnic and has different languages. It is hardly possible to find any single language, other than English, to cater to such a variety of monolingual speakers of different first languages.'

Whereas the reasons given acknowledge the urban location and linguistic diversity, it is just to sound compliant with the policy and not to accommodate the diversity. The justification for choosing L₂ as MOI is based on easing the teachers' task of dispensing knowledge as one-way mass communication to a group of passive listeners. It does not matter to what extent individual listeners follow. Indeed, pupils to whom L₂ is familiar in the lower primary classes were, in some cases, the minority.

Another head teacher said:

'Here we use English right from the nursery. The school is located in the centre of the town and in addition to that, this area has several languages that are used by its residents. We use English, a neutral language, to avoid cultural assimilation of speakers of other languages.'

When asked why L₂ was used so early, the same head teacher responded by saying:

'If examinations are in English, the use of any other language for instruction does not have any justification. The failure of using the mother tongue is manifested in the poor performance of those schools that use it.'

Another category of reasons was related to ethnic-based claims to which group the legitimate inhabitants of the area are in question. When asked to justify the choice of L₂, one head teacher said:

'There are wars on who owns Tororo and what language to be taught or used for teaching.'

Indeed, even in rural schools, the ethnic composition of staff in schools in neighbouring areas was dominated by the majority and earliest ethnic group to settle in the area.

Another category gave reasons related to the pupils' ability to understand what is taught. Schools in this category chose languages familiar to the majority of pupils or used multiple languages. One of the head teachers in this category explained:

'Children of the urban poor cannot comprehend if it (English) is used as the only language, especially in the lower primary classes.'

Another respondent qualified the choice of L₂ by saying:

'This school is in a peri-urban area and near a commercial centre, but we do not use English or any local language alone. ... We use English right from P1 but, as I said, it is not the only language used. So, in this school, we use English and Ateso.'

However, another head teacher in one of the schools that chose L₂ said:

'It is true that we officially chose English, but in peri-urban schools, like this one, children of the urban poor cannot comprehend if it is used as the only language of instruction.'

This head teacher gave the same policy compliance reasons for choosing L₂ as the previous one but differed in catering for those for whom the official choice is not familiar enough. The teachers in this kind of school are expected to use both languages until the learners are fluent in L₂. In addition to conforming to the policy, this head teacher acknowledged that using only the official MOI will marginalize the low socio-economic status pupils. This head teacher named the other languages used alongside L₂ and made the point clear that pupils' comprehension is essential and that multilingualism is the way to go.

In one of the schools that opted for languages from the MT/LL language category as the official medium of instruction, the head teacher said:

'In this school, Adhola is used as a medium of instruction in the lower primary section... Some of the challenges are that some of the teachers do not know Adhola well, and for some subjects, the content... is not easily translatable into the local language.'

This head teacher also recognized the importance of comprehension by mentioning that not all teachers were fluent in the official MOI and that translation was not easy in some subjects. The implication is that Adhola is useable only by teachers who know it well, and L₂ is used where or when translating the subject content is not possible. The point here is that even indigenous languages may not cater to comprehension for all learners and in all learning areas.

In another school where the choice was from the LL/MT category, the head teacher stated the language chosen and justified it by saying:

'Choosing Luganda complies with the language policy of using mother tongue or a familiar language to the majority of pupils in the early years of primary education.'

He further added:

'It is the dominant language, mother tongue to the majority of pupils in the school and easily learned and used by many of the speakers of other languages.'

Again, it complies with a policy that was foremost in the justification of the choice of MOI and was followed by the status of the chosen language. Unlike the previous head teacher, this one did not address the question of comprehension of content at an individual level.

Most of the reasons given are more related to the community as a whole than to individual learners, and even the ones related to learner performance approach it from the point of whole schools. In the end, the schools' performance in examinations is used to justify the means, even in the choice of pedagogy.

Findings from observation revealed that the practical reasons for the choice of MOI were mainly related to easing the teachers' work instead of focusing on learner comprehension and participation during the learning process. Teaching was concerned with ensuring that learners took summarized notes of the lesson's examinable learning content. Where the form of the learning content of the lesson was basically information to be listened to and become known, the teaching methods mainly required the pupils to listen to and observe the teacher, or whoever it was, speaking or reading. As a result, in classes where the chosen language of instruction was unfamiliar to most of the learners, the pupils were generally passive compared to classes where the language was familiar. Both teacher and pupils attached great importance to the writing part of the lesson than to the preceding oral-aural part.

In classes where the chosen language of instruction was familiar to the majority of the pupils or where the teacher used multiple languages to involve even those to whom the chosen language was unfamiliar, learner comprehension and participation were realized. Teachers engaged the pupils in pair and group oral work or literacy work based on graphic materials. The pupils actively participated in the lesson, although some of them had incorrect language constructions and use of vocabulary. Evidently, using English as MOI right from P1 did not improve fluency in the language as a subject for those who did not have exposure to it beyond school. The pupils were actively involved to the extent that they individually participated in guided note-making in the language used for written work.

Findings related to the pedagogical practices used with the chosen MOI showed that the teaching/learning practices used in the lessons tended to evolve from the discourse and content of the lesson. In classes where the majority of pupils could follow the lesson, they expressed themselves very freely and defended their contributions when challenged or required to do so. In return, the teacher would continue the prepared lesson content and adjust the teaching practices in accordance with the pupils' responses. In the course of the lessons, the practices became more (or less) participatory and interactive depending on how many of the pupils were cognitively involved and hence responsive.

Findings from the analysis of the documents used by teachers showed that all documents produced or otherwise procured were in L₂ (English). The improvised blackboard illustrations were also in English. Apart from the teacher-improvised blackboard illustrations, most of the other graphic materials used were derived from textbooks. The effectiveness and use of documentary resources that were in L₂ were found to be more related to the language of instruction being familiar than to be the same as that of the original production.

4.1. Discussion of the Findings

Schools that chose indigenous languages gave reasons related to language status, like the specific language chosen to be a majority one. The status of a language in terms of being 'majority', 'native', or 'dominant' is based on areas/communities larger (and about periods longer) than it is relevant to classroom communication in a specific location or time. The term 'majority language' can be used in reference to areas as large as a district or even a country. However, within such an area, there can be parts where the undisputed majority language is not used by many people and, therefore, not socially dominant. The number of speakers of the non-majority languages in some parts of the area can outnumber the speakers of the majority language of that area (see, for example, McNab, 1989). Hence, a majority of language may be unfamiliar to school-going children who do not use it as a home language. Children who use such a language for the first time at school may find it even more unfamiliar and difficult to acquire than the second language. The choice of MOI should be based on factors related to pupils instead of the status of the individual languages involved (David-Erb, 2021).

Some schools chose indigenous languages for the reason that such languages were the heritage languages of the original indigenous inhabitants. The reason could also be that the area is within a geo-political local administration unit that is part of an ethnically defined realm. Such criteria may not have a bearing on the language used by a significant proportion of the contemporary population. Although Adhola is considered the indigenous language in Tororo, its use in schools is not spread to the whole area. Hence, the choice of language of instruction, based solely on being an indigenous one, may not make a choice appropriate for all pupils. One way to accommodate pupils who speak different languages and are not yet able to use the second language alone is to use translanguaging (Omidire & Ayob, 2020).

Since the choice of MOI is a school-level decision, neighbouring schools in ethno/linguistically diverse areas may, and perhaps should, choose different indigenous languages depending on the relative concentration of speakers of the different languages in the catchment area of each school. However, where choice is influenced by the availability of materials in the different languages, languages for which materials are not readily available in some of the areas where they are used are less likely to be chosen. The younger the children are, the less their chances of being bilingual, and as such, those early primary school pupils for whom the chosen language is not the first or home language may find it completely strange.

Many of the schools that chose the second language as MOI did so on the argument that it is a neutral language. The idea of neutrality is in relation to the variety of cultural identities of the ethno-linguistic groups that constitute the population. It has nothing to do with the ability of the people in a neutral language. Kiswahili is a neutral language in all East African countries. However, the degree to which it is familiar, especially among children, is not significant in countries where it is not taught. The advantage of choosing a neutral language, if it is not familiar to the learners, maybe only limited to the teacher, or in terms of justifying the use of the more readily available learning materials. Improvised materials and resources with a familiar language as a medium of instruction were found to provide better learner participation and learning opportunities than better resources with an unfamiliar language.

Another argument in favour of a neutral second language is its presumed role in promoting patriotic/nationalistic identities and avoiding cultural assimilation of the weak groups by the strong ones. Like the other arguments, this one also relegates pupils and their ability to learn to a level of importance below nationalism. It is great to have national unity, but to an educationist, it is even of greater and primary importance if all the nationals have fair chances of accessing education. Some of the shortcomings of providing education through languages that are unfamiliar to the learners are high-class repetition and drop-out rates (Heugh, 2011).

Another reason why second languages are preferred to indigenous languages is that they are the sole official languages of instruction and assessment in early-exit MT-BLE models. Again the criterion for choice is based on what the pupils are supposed or expected to achieve later on rather than their current language ability to progress towards that achievement. Teachers, and schools in general, are more concerned about how many of their registered candidates will pass and be admitted at the next level than whether every pupil has a chance to participate in learning. Parents are concerned about whether their children will qualify for courses that promise profitable employment.

The debate on the choice between different languages sometimes digresses into which language is more developed instead of focusing on how the more familiar and widely used language(s) can be developed to serve as media of instruction for all subjects. Countries like Ethiopia, whose experience with colonialism did not breed linguistic dependency, managed to develop their languages to levels capable of supporting learning up to the end of primary education (Nekatiabet, 2007).

The reasons for choosing MOI, whether L_2 or any language from the MT/LL category, were very much similar for schools that chose languages from the same category. However, the reasons were mainly related to teachers' ease of use at a whole-class level rather than the personal participation of individual learners. For rural schools that chose the L_2 , the level of L_2 ability among learners was too low for them to actively participate in learning (Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2006). Moreover, for urban schools that chose one language from the MT/LL category, the teachers tended to conceptualize and plan the lessons in English and translate them into the chosen language.

Regardless of what choice is made, in many situations, it is influenced by secondary, logistical considerations like language status and ready availability of instructional resources and trained staff in the chosen language. Instead, the point should be how to ensure that in the teaching and learning process, the teacher and the learners can engage in relevantly meaningful activities for the specified learning content, as it happens in language acquisition and vocational apprenticeship.

Despite the popularity of L_2 among parents and teachers, the conditions for its use as a medium of instruction are not easily realizable in most African Countries. Even the teachers, even bilingual themselves, lack the kind of specialist

pedagogical expertise for teaching in a medium the learners are still struggling to learn (Clegg J., 2005) and, as a result, cannot achieve inclusion for monolinguals who speak different indigenous languages (Wodon & Cosentino, 2019).

5. Conclusion

In view of the kind of reasons head teachers give for choosing media of instruction, it is evident that choice is aimed at easing the teachers' work. Leaving the choice of MOI to individual schools leads to choice being based on criteria that may not be relevant to the learners' immediate learning communication needs or their language abilities. In most cases, the choices made were acceptable. However, the reasons for the choice did not emphasise the importance of promoting learners' practical and interactive use of the chosen languages to promote comprehension for cognitive learning. Hence, the choice of language of instruction is premised on how easily or fast teachers can disseminate learning content as a finished product to the class. The use of majority languages as MOI by teachers aiming at easing their own passing on of information leads to the assumption that exposing learners to learning content is sufficient for learning. This suggests that teachers who are fluent in the chosen language medium ignore learners to whom the language may be less familiar. Where languages are chosen because of their status, their use over time may lead to pupils and parents thinking that it is more important to use a specific language than to achieve mutual comprehension.

6. Recommendations

Resolving issues related to the choice of MOI revolves around accepting that learning occurs when individual learners meaningfully interact within a learning situation. To achieve enhanced learner interaction, it is necessary for the medium of instruction to aim at promoting personal comprehension and expression among learners. Such interaction helps to support peer learning, especially for those who may not easily learn from the teacher. To achieve the desired interaction, it is recommended that:

- Choice should begin at the regional, for example, district level, by education planners and language educationists according to the ethno-linguistic diversity and average socio-economic standing of specific areas. Then choice by individual schools should be from a range of options covering the needs and abilities of all pupils in schools within the region. Choice must not be limited to single languages because, in life, linguistic diversity and multilingualism occur together.
- Education planning should provide for the balanced establishment of schools using different language combinations as MOI under the same MT-MLE model according to linguistic composition, rural/urban conditions, and socio-economic status structure in all areas of linguistic diversity.
- New and existing private primary schools licensed by the government should be required to make their school language policies relevant for implementing the wider language policy plans for the areas they are located in to fill existing gaps.
- The LOI policy should be reviewed to provide for the choice of multiple languages as official MOIs since use is already bi-/multi-lingual.
- MOI choice patterns should be worked out at local levels with advice from language educationists and policy technocrats.
- Primary teacher education curriculum should be reviewed to include several indigenous languages as electives for those opting to specialise in lower primary.

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