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# **The dilemmas and complexities of implementing language-in-education policies: Perspectives from urban and rural contexts in Uganda**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Language-in-education policies are a highly debated topic in Africa and at the root of understanding inequalities in Africa's education systems. This article explores the implementation of Uganda's recent local language education policy; how it has been received and practiced in urban and rural contexts, and the major challenges and implications addressed by education stakeholders in each context. The study confirms that the use of local languages as the language of instruction has contributed to the improvement of literacy skills, children's participation in lessons, and their understanding of content. Nevertheless, the local language policy was fiercely disputed by teachers, parents and various authorities at district and national levels, as many appeared to be concerned with the policy constraining children's academic success at upper primary levels and limiting their transition to secondary education. Through the study, the authors highlight critical misconceptions and assumptions in language-in-education within both policy development and in local education practices and perceptions. The article points to a review of language-in-education in its entirety; across mediums of instruction *and* assessment for lower and upper primary levels; across teaching methodologies for second language acquisition in multilingual environments; and across socio-economic divides in rural and urban regions of the country.

**Key words:** Language policy; Medium of instruction; Policy implementation; English; Africa; Uganda.

## **1. Introduction**

Ethnicity, culture and language are deeply intertwined throughout the world and are closely related to issues of social and economic development, inequality, discrimination and intergroup conflict. Since the majority of countries are characterised by linguistic and ethnic diversity, language(s) of instruction in education policies are intensely debated. Within the context of sub-Saharan Africa, there are many scholars (see Fafunwa et al., 1989; Prah, 2000; Mazrui, 1996) who make a strong correlation between underdevelopment and the use of a foreign language as the official language-in-education and are largely concerned that instruction in a colonial language fails to offer the needed grounding in literacy skills, identity and history. They suggest that such policies eventually fail the student, the community and the nation (Trudell, 2005). Consequently, several authors call for a rethinking of African education, particularly language of instruction policies (Bunyi, 1999; Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004).

This article seeks to contribute to the debate on language-in-education policies by exploring the case of Uganda. In 2007, the country introduced a new local language policy, where local languages would be used as the language of instruction in lower primary levels, specifically for rural areas. As gaps between the quality of education in urban and rural areas continue to expand (see Serpell, 1999), there is a critical need to review how language-in-education policies are mediated between the multilingual realities in both urban and rural regions. With over 60 indigenous languages, none of which are spoken by the majority, and 15 major ethnic groups (Read and Enyutu, 2005), Uganda presents a compelling context in which to study the implementation of local language policies. The country 'lies on the crossroads of several main language groups of Africa', and its linguistic diversity is considered extreme even for Africa (Pawlikova-Vilhanova, 1996: 163). Based on three

separate research studies conducted in urban and rural contexts, this article analyses the implementation profiles and challenges from a comparative perspective, and discusses various implications of the local language policy.

## **2. Debates on Language-in-Education in Africa**

The languages of former colonial countries (i.e. English, Spanish, French and Portuguese) have frequently dominated languages of minority ethnic groups in Africa and have historically been installed in various institutional settings, particularly schools. During colonial and most of post-colonial Africa, educational opportunities have only been available to a small elite class, which has produced colonial languages, specifically English, as a celebrated status symbol and prestigious educated identity shared by students and their families (see Ssekamwa, 1997; Paige, 2000). Consequently, the use of English as the medium of instruction resulted in differential educational treatments and maintenance or intensification of societal inequalities (Bunyi, 1999).

In today's globalised world, western languages continue to hold precedence over all other indigenous languages. On the one side of the debate colonial languages have become prioritised as the language of economic development, stability, international communication and scientific knowledge (Gandolfo, 2009). Many local groups recognize the importance of English for economic and social mobility and believe it to be one of the most important aspects of schooling (Watson, 2007).

On the other side of the debate, language rights experts would argue that this leads to a greater dependency on Western powers. The hegemonic influence of western languages and their corresponding forms of knowledge have promoted and legitimised both western linguistic and cultural dominance (Gandolfo, 2009). According to some scholars, education policies emphasising English as the medium of instruction devalue and marginalise

indigenous languages, knowledges and cultural identities. Knowledge no longer becomes transformative and empowering to students and communities alike, where English as the medium of instruction acts as a barrier to knowledge, and marginalises minority groups (Gandolfo, 2009; Watson, 2007; Brock-Utne, 2001).

Following this argument, the importance of providing education in the child's first language <sup>1</sup> (also referred to as the home language or mother-tongue) has been well-established as a fundamental linguistic human right (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2001). According to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, all children have the right to education and right to learn and use the language of the family. Therefore, signatory countries are responsible for guaranteeing this right to its citizens. As Watson asserts, '...any discussion of ethnic minorities cannot ignore the question of language nor can any discussion of human rights ignore the question of linguistic rights' (2007: 253).

Furthermore, an increasing body of literature (see Baker, 2001; Cummins, 1993; Benson, 2004) suggests that there are significant pedagogical advantages of using a child's mother tongue as the language of instruction in schools. First, through the use of mother tongue, students can understand sound-symbols and meaning-symbol relations and learn the rules of the orthographic system of their language (Diaz, 1999). When learning new concepts, teachers and pupils are able to interact naturally and negotiate meanings together through local languages to develop literacy skills. Second, the use of local language as both the medium of instruction and assessment allows for accurate assessments of children and their aptitude. Conversely, when English is used, it is more difficult for teachers to determine if children have difficulty understanding the concept, the language of instruction, or the language of assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> We use UNESCO's definition of first language or mother tongue as 'a language the child can speak fluently before going to school... one in which the child can operate confidently in all domains relevant to the child's life' (Van Dyken, 1990: 40).

Third, in multi-lingual societies the use of local language also greatly increases students' ability to learn a second language through communication and discussion rather than memorisation of words and sounds. Using a language with which the child is familiar allows for the transfer of cognitive skills as discussed in Cummins' *interdependence theory* and concept of *common underlying proficiency* (see Cummins, 1993). Within his theory, literacy and concepts learned in the local language can be accessed and used in the second language once oral English skills are developed. On the contrary, when children begin primary school in a foreign language, such as English, Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1998: 29) argue that the second language is learned at the expense of local languages in a 'subtractive manner'. Students find learning more difficult and feel discouraged and overwhelmed. As Robinson (1996) contends, children who learn in an unfamiliar language receive the following messages: if they want to succeed intellectually, it will not be by using their mother tongue; and thus their mother tongue has little value. Such experiences might lead to some unintended consequences like lower academic achievement, repetition and drop-out (Webley, 2006). It is important to note that the pedagogical advantages underlined above are privy to two preconditions: 1) that basic human needs are being met so that schooling can take place; and 2) that mother tongue-based bilingual schooling is properly implemented (Benson, 2004).

After highlighting some of the major debates on language-in-education policies, we review the case of Uganda to illustrate how such debates are reflected upon in the country.

### **3. Language policies in Uganda: a historical review**

During the colonial period, English was consolidated through education as the language of an elite class. Schools modelled Britain's public school system, attempting to produce civil servants for the colonial government, which reflected European values and

culture (Ssekamwa, 1997). However, following the British's paternalistic linguistic ideology, indigenous languages were also used in schools as the medium of instruction to provide political stability against clashing ethnic rivalries (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998). Nevertheless, with the move towards independence, the British became more concerned with establishing a new Afro-Western elite. English was institutionalised as the official national language of the country and became the sole medium used in schools, teacher-training and publishing of education materials (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998).

With Uganda's independence in 1962, there was a rising debate of having a local language as the national language of the country. However, because of the diverse and multiple ethnic groups, no consensus for one Afro-ethnic official language was made. There were some attempts to make Kiswahili the official language, as in Kenya and Tanzania where it has been systematically promoted in all spheres of life. For instance, in 1973, Idi Amin declared Kiswahili the national language by decree, but it was never implemented in practice. It rather brought deep divisions between the diverse ethnic groups throughout the country (Pawlikova-Vilhanova, 1996). Today, most Ugandans negatively associate Kiswahili with the Idi Amin regime and the Army. Consequently, since independence, throughout Uganda's civil war and post-conflict re-stabilisation with the Museveni government in 1986, English has prominently remained the official language of Uganda and the language of instruction in schools.

In the post-conflict era, Uganda's education system has undergone a series of educational reviews which have supported the use of indigenous languages in primary schooling. The most significant review was in 1989 and resulted in the Government White Paper on Education, titled '*Education for National Development and Integration*'. Alongside the renowned 1997 Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy, a new local language policy was recommended in primary education, aiming to enable 'individuals to acquire functional

literacy, numeracy and communication skills in English, Kiswahili and at least one Ugandan language (Republic of Uganda, 1992: x). However the local language policy was not implemented as the majority of the education ministry's provisions were directed to the UPE agenda.

Due to the growing concerns of low education quality after the implementation of UPE (see Read and Enyutu, 2005), the local language policy was re-examined in a 2004 curriculum review process. The new language-in-education policy became part of a new child-centred pedagogical reform to make schooling relevant and meaningful to students as well as improve literacy levels in Uganda. Consequently, a new curriculum, which was labelled the Thematic Curriculum (due to its thematic organisation of content), was piloted in 2006 and launched nationwide in 2007 (see Altinyelken, 2010a).

The Thematic Curriculum includes the Local Language Policy prescribed in the Government White Paper and stipulates that wherever possible the child should learn in the home language or at least in a language that is familiar to the child. Therefore, all learning materials used in the first three years of primary education will be provided in the child's local language. English will be introduced to lower primary children as a subject. In addition, all written tests that are used for assessment purposes will be administered in the local language except for the assessment of English language competences. However, in Primary Four (P4), both English and the local language will be used, with a gradual transition from local languages to English as the medium of instruction. By the end of P4, the local language will only be used for explaining the most difficult concepts. Written materials, including textbooks, will be in simple English and all assessments will be carried out in English. During the remaining three years of upper primary education, English will be used as the language of instruction across the country (NCDC, 2006). Therefore, the Ugandan language-in-education policy follows a so-called 'early-exit model' (see Brock-Utne, 2010). It is important to note



that in areas where there is no predominant local language or area language (such as urban areas or boarding schools which enrol students from all over the country), English will be the language of instruction and assessment at all grade levels.

Following the local language policy the NCDC has identified 63 languages and six generalised main area languages, which expanded to nine in recent years.<sup>2</sup> As these area languages have established orthographies and make up 80-90% of the population, they have been largely adopted as the local languages used in Uganda's local language policy (Ward et al., 2006). In such a diverse linguistic environment, this article explores the new local language policy across varying and multiple linguistic regions, providing a comparative analysis between rural and urban perspectives.

#### **4. Methodology**

This article is informed by four studies conducted by three researchers in various time periods and locations in Uganda. The research on urban schools was conducted between June and July 2007 in the capital city, Kampala, while the research on rural schools was carried out in November 2009 in Teso region, and two separate studies were conducted in Bukomansimbi District from February to December 2011. The studies had broader research objectives to examine the implementation of the Thematic Curriculum, in which the language-in-education policy was a central aspect.

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<sup>2</sup> These main area languages include: Luganda, Ateso (including Ngakaramajong and its variants), Luo (including Acholi, Alur, Langi and Dopedhola), Lugbara and Runyakitara (an artificial language established by Makerere University incorporating Runyoro, Rutoro, Runyankore and Rukiga). Other regional language possibilities include: Lukhonzu, Lusoga, and Lunyole.

#### **4.1. Schools**

In total 19 primary schools participated in the studies: eight urban schools in Kampala, six rural schools in the Teso region, and five rural schools in the Bukomansimbi District. The schools visited in Kampala were government-aided primary schools involved in piloting the Thematic Curriculum before its nation-wide implementation. Because of their participation in the piloting project, teachers in these schools were better trained, better equipped with resources, and had more experience with the new curricula compared to other teachers throughout the country. School sizes ranged between 500 and 2,258 pupils, where the majority of pupils came from low or middle socio-economic backgrounds. Due to the diverse ethnic backgrounds of the population, all schools used English as the language of instruction at all grade levels.

In the Teso study five government-aided schools were sampled, located in the Bukedea, Kumi and Soroti districts, and were involved in a World Teacher Project (WTP) managed by a Dutch NGO, Edukans. The schools had enrolment rates between 319 and 1,345 pupils predominantly from low socio-economic backgrounds. The schools were ethnically homogenous from the Iteso ethnic group, where Ateso was used as the local language of instruction at the lower primary levels. A final sixth privately funded school was included in the study, where pupils largely came from affluent backgrounds in different regions across Uganda.

The third research site was located in the Bukomansimbi District in the Southwestern region of Uganda, where the Buganda ethnic group is most dominant making up 77% of the population (BDO, 2011). The regional language of the Baganda people, Luganda, is the prominent language spoken and, therefore, has been adopted as the language of instruction. Four of the five schools that participated in the study were government-aided schools, the

fifth being a private boarding school. School population sizes ranged from 203 to 899 students, with the majority of pupils coming from low socio-economic households, dependent on subsistence living for their livelihoods. Of the five schools visited, only three had implemented the language-in-education policy. The two other schools, which included the privately run school, had adopted their own school language policies, choosing to use English as the sole medium of instruction from P1 through to P7.

#### **4.2. Methods**

A case study approach (Yin, 2009) was used in this research, with interviews and classroom observations informing the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 34 teachers in urban schools and 52 in rural schools. The majority of teachers interviewed were from lower primary grades, although a number of upper primary teachers were interviewed in the rural studies to better understand the transition from local language to English in P4. Furthermore, 31 interviews were conducted with a select number of key education stakeholders, including ministry and district officials, representatives of national teachers' colleges, donors, and Parent-Teacher Association members. The majority of interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, while a few were completed in small groups. Interviews aimed at exploring views on the language-in-education policy, teaching practices, implementation challenges and perceived outcomes and implications of the policy.

#### **5. Implementation profiles and challenges**

In this section, we will try to portray how the language policy is implemented in urban and rural schools based on the accounts of teachers who were in charge of putting the

language policy into practice. While doing so, we reflect upon how the policy is exercised in schools and highlight the challenges encountered by teachers.

## **5.1. Urban settings**

### **5.1.1. English as the medium of instruction**

In accordance with the policy, the schools in Kampala used English as the medium of instruction starting from P1 in all thematic areas, except for *News* and *Story Time* where teachers allowed pupils to converse in local languages as well. The use of English was favourably received by the majority of families. Since urban centres are largely multi-lingual, none of the local languages could be used as the medium of instruction. English was viewed as the second best choice; a ‘neutral’ language amongst cultural and linguistic diversity in Kampala. As one head teacher commented:

We are using English as this is a metropolitan area with children from numerous tribal backgrounds. It is not ideal, not the best, yet it is the second best choice. We cannot teach these children in any local language.

English as a colonial language was highly received in both urban and rural areas. Indeed, several teachers contended that parents wanted their children to learn English: ‘Parents are very proud when they see their children speaking English’; ‘Parents see English as a good investment for their children’s future’. Teachers noted that parents often associate English with increased opportunities for social and economic mobility, with good education, status and better job prospects. Some teachers also reported that parents in urban areas were pleased to see their children learning English at a very young age, earlier than children in rural schools. Hence, they believed that their children were in an advantageous position for

the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE); a two day national exam that students write at the end of P7, that covers the four principal subjects, Mathematics, English, Integrated Science and Social Studies, all of which is set in English.

Pupils entering primary school differed substantially in terms of their familiarity with English and the level of their language comprehension. Teachers suggested that pupils who attended pre-primary schools were exposed to English at an earlier age, and had a better basic understanding of it. However, many pupils did not have the same equal opportunities to attend pre-primary institutions or speak English in their homestead. For these children English was heard for the first time when they started P1. Such differential experiences have eventually led to differences in children's level of English comprehension in classrooms. Even among pupils who attended pre-primary schools, there were observable comprehension discrepancies due to differences in the years of attending pre-primary schooling; the general quality of these institutions; and the emphasis they put on teaching English. The level of attendance of pre-primary education differed widely in the eight schools visited in the urban study. Schools that were situated in the urban centre reported higher attendance rates (up to 90% in one school). However, schools which are situated close to slum areas and have pupils who have migrated from Northern and Eastern regions reported very low rates of pre-primary school attendance.

Due to the differences in language proficiency, teachers felt compelled to give differential tasks to stimulate learning. They grouped children according to their abilities in which language proficiency played a decisive role. Another strategy used by teachers was code switching and code-mixing.<sup>3</sup> When it was observed that pupils did not understand a topic, teachers would switch to Luganda (the local language in the Kampala region) and

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<sup>3</sup> As Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir (2004) discuss in their study in Tanzania and South Africa language-in-education policies, code-switching refers to teachers switching languages *inter-sententially* or between sentences. Code switching does not necessarily indicate a deficiency in the teacher or speaker. Code-mixing, on the other hand, is *intra-sentential*, where the switching of languages occurs within the same sentence. Code-mixing many times indicates a lack of language competence in one or both of the languages concerned (Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004).

repeat the same explanation. Some teachers, however, preferred to uphold English as the medium of instruction, as they believed this would reinforce their English skills. Moreover, a few teachers noted that they used student translators in classrooms where non-English and non-Luganda speakers existed. They asked students who were proficient enough in English and a local language (other than Luganda) to translate concepts or instructions. Teachers were not very concerned with non-Luganda speakers as they believed that they too would learn Luganda by the end of the first term, since in the schoolyard, Luganda continued to be the dominant language despite teachers' efforts to encourage English.

Furthermore, the lack of textbooks and reading materials (such as story books) was considered a major impediment to improving English language proficiency. Large classroom sizes posed another big challenge. In schools visited in Kampala, there were approximately 70 or more pupils per classroom. High pupil-teacher ratios not only increased demands on classroom management but also constrained teachers' efforts to pay individual attention to pupils' English competencies and provide adequate stimulation and feedback (see also Altinyelken, 2010a; 2012).

### **5.1.2. Local language as a subject**

As explained earlier, urban schools were given the opportunity to choose a local language and teach this language as a subject. Discussions around this issue generated much tension in numerous schools. Schools where Luganda was the dominant language spoken by families did not experience such tensions, but in schools where there was no majority, the choice of a local language was a contentious issue. For instance, in one school parents preferred Kiswahili, as the majority of families worked in security forces. However, the school could not offer Kiswahili as a subject due to lack of teachers who are proficient in the

language. The Northern Acholi language was also put forth by parents, although it was strongly opposed by non-Acholi parents. In the end, the school decided upon Luganda, as teachers spoke the language and pupils were presumed to be able to pick it up overtime. This choice was not welcomed by parents who migrated from the North. Teachers noted that parents did not want their children to spend their time in school learning a different local language, believed to be sacrificing from their time learning English. Hence, the choice of local language remained an on-going debate between parents and schools.

## **5.2. Rural settings**

### **5.2.1. Local language as the medium of instruction**

Historically, rural schoolchildren began their schooling in English, a language they had never heard or been exposed to before. Such encounters, as described by Ministry officials, were seen as traumatising and alienating for children leading, in many cases, to gradual disintegration and estrangement. In addition, children felt overwhelmed due to the expectations to learn and communicate in an alien language, while at the same time learn how to read and write. Policy makers believed the use of local languages in the new language-in-education policy offered the possibility of eliminating such hardships, allowing children to acquire literacy skills much faster in a language they were familiar with, as well as providing a smooth transition to learning English, having English as a subject at lower primary levels.

However, there were a number of heightened issues regarding the choice of local language used as the medium of instruction in rural schools. In classrooms where there were multiple ethnic groups, such as in the Teso region, many children did not understand the regional language, Ateso, selected as the medium of instruction. Teachers did not have the time nor capacity to teach these children in their own mother tongue, which created exclusive

boundaries for these children of ethnic-minority. One of the reasons the private boarding school, in the Teso study, opposed the local language policy and decided upon English as the medium of instruction beginning in P1 was due to the discrepancies surrounding Ateso as the language of instruction

Such local language discrepancies were not as common in the Bukomansimbi region; however the problem was still present as not all children were of the Buganda population. As a teacher explained:

You might be having 90 children in the class, you find five of them who do not understand Luganda, but the majority does what? Understands. So you might go with the majority and will leave the minority. You can teach them and at the end of the term he is just picking. That's why you can find at the beginning of the second term, some have not come back.

Following the decentralised education processes in Uganda, the development of orthographies, texts and instructional materials have largely become the responsibility of voluntary District Language Boards (see Ward et al., 2006). While some ethnic groups may hold substantial resources in promoting their languages, through radio and newspapers and other media outlets, religious texts etc., such as the Buganda people, many ethnic groups lack the financial means and, at times, motivations to establish their Afro-ethnic language in the education system, which excludes those children from the right to have education in their mother tongue.

Policy makers also noted that there were competitions amongst local languages before the implementation of the new language policy. Ethnic populations were attempting to mainstream their own dialects, which created severe financial challenges for the Ministry to provide resource books and materials in local languages. As an official from the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) commented:



The White Paper of 1992 recommended seven regional languages. By the time we started, almost every tribe wanted their own language, although we have planned for seven, by the time we started it became nine, and by the time we started with implementation it became 30. We have just catered for nine in terms of teacher resource books. We have the problem they say why not; what about us; why the nine? The Ministry promised that we shall be catering for others in phases. Right now we are supposed to taken on six new ones. And that one makes 15 out of 30... Local language is a big challenge.

Similar to urban schools, another important implementation challenge encountered in rural schools was a lack of learning materials, such as textbooks, storybooks and other reading materials provided for in local languages to aid learning and stimulate a reading culture. There were minimal resources in general and priority was usually given to purchasing English materials. Consequently, in both the Teso and Bukomansimbi studies, teachers were required to translate the written English text back to the local language. Yet, teachers in both regions struggled with translations as some English words did not exist in Ateso or Luganda, or required further explanation using more than one word. Moreover, many teachers did not know how certain words were spelled in their local languages. Similar translation concerns were raised in relation to curriculum documents, which were developed and printed in English. As teachers prepared their lesson plans, they were required to translate them into their local languages. As a result, some teachers in Bukomansimbi suggested that although Luganda is their mother tongue, it is more challenging for them to teach in Luganda.

These problems point to the shortcomings of preparing teachers to teach in local languages in the lower primary levels. Some teachers were concerned that they received teacher training in English, but were not trained on how to teach a local language. At the same time there were subtle assumptions by some teachers that suggested being able to speak

a language was sufficient grounds to teach a language, which applied both to local language at the lower primary level and English at the upper primary level.

In addition, according to teachers, many parents resisted the local language policy, believing that local language could be spoken at home and was not something which required teaching in formal education spaces. Parents continued to demand English, perceiving it as a tool for communication, future employment opportunities and social status. They were often unaware of the pedagogical benefits of using a language children were familiar with. As a member of a school's Parent-Teacher Association in Bukomansimbi discussed:

[Children] can learn local languages in their homes, with their parents and their peers, but when they come to school they are supposed to use English with teachers and with their friends in the compound.

Consequently, parents who could afford to enrol their children in private schools, which did not follow the local language policy, were eager to do so to heighten their children's accessibility and exposure to English. Parents were also found to enrol their children in private schools for children's lower primary education to learn English and transfer their children to government-aided schools at P4 when these schools also started teaching in English. Families' emphasis on using English in schools has led some government-aided schools to disregard the national language-in-education policy and follow their own language policy, as is the case for one of our schools in the Bukomansimbi sample. As the deputy head-teacher of the school explained:

Here... in Bukomansimbi, we sat down and said parents are our customers and you need to follow what the customers want. So we said, 'Please, when we consider our customers they really want their pupils to study in English.' And here, we also have different tribes and we are in town, so we said, 'Please our customers want this, so we need to follow what our customers want.'

As ‘customers’, families demand for English as the medium of instruction taught in schools has yielded many schools to follow their own school policies. A policymaker provided further insights and rationale stating:

Some schools are not implementing it. One reason is that people did not have teachers who can teach local languages. And in some, teachers did not have training. I am mainly talking about private schools. Then it also depends on attitude, if head-teacher is not enthusiastic about local language then it will not be implemented. Education Standards Agency is supposed to foresee the implementation, but you see some schools are never visited by inspectors.

### **5.2.2. The use of English as a subject in rural schools**

In rural areas, English is offered as a subject every day for 30 minutes in lower primary levels. Nevertheless, teachers in both rural regions that we studied raised several concerns on this policy component. The policy assumes that rural children can master English at lower grades through taking it up as a subject, providing children the competencies needed to make the gradual transition to instruction in English at P4. Teachers' accounts both in Teso and Bukomansimbi suggested that these expectations were hard to realise. Almost all teachers interviewed believed that children do not develop sufficient English skills as the time allocated to the subject was too short, and on occasion would be appropriated with other subjects or activities. In various classroom observations, some lower primary teachers spent time translating words from local language into English while teaching other parts of the thematic curriculum, trying to give children a larger vocabulary of English words.

Teachers in both rural studies asserted that they had to use children’s local language when teaching the English subject; otherwise students would not understand the lesson. Other

teachers commented that while teaching English, they had to repeatedly explain the English material, which would take away from covering the curriculum content. Such comments highlighted teachers' unfamiliarity in teaching foreign languages and the methodologies required. Other teachers argued that many children ignored the English lessons altogether, because of their unfamiliarity with the language and being accustomed to hearing local language at home and during all other subjects.

The major concern amongst teachers in Bukomansimbi and Teso was associated with how their pupils' lack of English proficiency would translate in P4, as the medium of instruction shifted to English entirely.

### **5.2.3. Transition to English as the language of instruction**

At the time of the first rural study in the Teso region, the local language policy had only been implemented up to P3, thus the transition phase in P4 had not taken place yet. Since teachers in these schools were generally appreciative of the pedagogical values of using Ateso as the language of instruction and were pleased with the improvements they had noticed in literacy skills, they appeared to be more optimistic about the transition. Some believed that since children now knew and understood more content, they would be able to retain such knowledge even after the transition to English. In addition, literacy skills in local language were deemed supportive skills required to learn a second language. Nevertheless, several concerns were raised among teachers, indicating that pupils would not have acquired the necessary proficiency in English at P4 to make the transition to English.

The Bukomansimbi study took place in 2011, where the local language reform had been implemented through to P6 and thus we were able to study the effects of the local language policy and the transition to English as the medium of instruction in the upper primary levels. As interviews highlighted, many problems arose in children's academic

achievement in the interim P4 year. Many teachers reported that children who were performing well in lower classes suddenly began performing poorly in P4. Children were able to read, but they did not understand what they were reading, and had difficulties with spelling and explaining the meaning of words. Such problems persisted at upper primary levels as well, where teachers believed children did not remember what they had learned, due to the change in language of instruction. The following remarks of teachers illustrate their concerns:

The policy they made for us is making them fail. So this P4 year is a struggle year for them, to make them to understand English. They read, but they do not understand what they are reading.

At P4, they cannot even read a simple sentence in English.

You may find that you as a teacher in those thematic classes you have best learners in your class. But when it comes to P4, even you the teacher, you can be worried.

I am happy, because it is our local language. But the outcome disappoints us.

There is much stress amongst these teachers that by following the local language policy, pupils do not have the required proficiency to read and write English and pass the end-of-term examinations at the upper primary levels. As one teacher explained:

It is better for the child to use English when the child is still young, to build a strong foundation. Because... every year they are promoted with automatic promotion, but as they are being promoted their English is not strengthened. So, as they do the next level they find an even bigger challenge. In P5, P6, you may find a child who does not know how to speak English and all of the questions are set in English! As they go up then you will find English is a problem and the child will just drop out.

As explained in the earlier section, teachers believed the main reason for the transition failure was the limited time allocated to English as a subject in lower grades. The transition was believed to be further complicated by the fact that at P4 the curriculum shifts from a thematic approach to a subject-based one.

Furthermore, teachers recognized children's lack of proficiency in English is due to the large absenteeism of pupils in rural areas, which has created inconsistent and disconnected learning experiences, especially in the acquisition of a second language for children. In rural areas, the majority of households do not speak English and thus English is provided only in school spaces. Some parents do not send their children to school on a frequent basis, requiring them to take on domestic and/or income-generating activities in support of the household's survival. Moreover, most children lack basic school needs, such as lunches, books, pens and pencils due to their poor socio-economic backgrounds. The lack of basic school needs and inconsistency in children's schooling disavows children to learn sufficient English communication and literacy skills required for the upper primary level.

Because of the lack of children's English proficiency in upper primary levels, many teachers have adopted code-switching and code-mixing strategies in their teaching practices to ensure material was understood. In many of the classroom observations at the upper primary level, material was first written in English on the chalkboard for children to copy into their notebooks. Teachers took time to recite the information on the board in English, with children repeating in unison. Following this, teachers would switch to Luganda to ensure the topic was understood. As teachers' interviews confirmed this strategy:

Sometimes the way a word is used in English is slightly different than how it is used in Luganda. I do not explain word by word, but I explain the idea. Luganda helps

them understand more deeply. You see blank stares on their faces when they do not understand English, but they always say, 'Yes! Yes! We understand.'

... Pupils understand better in Luganda. It is less work in getting the curriculum across. When you say it in English the child just looks at you. Then you put in some Luganda and you know the child understands.

Code-switching and/or code-mixing has evolved into a coping strategy for teachers at all levels, at times to make lessons simpler for themselves; to hide their own inadequacy of the language; and to meet the demands of the curriculum. Nevertheless, there is a strong consensus by teachers in rural areas that the use of both English and local language is necessary to help children understand because of student's lack of proficiency. Several teachers discussed their frustration in having to spend additional time and effort teaching basic English competencies at upper primary levels rather than focusing on subject content. It was not uncommon for teachers to find pupils at upper levels answering exam questions in Luganda.

It is important to highlight that while teachers used code-switching strategies in the classroom, many rural schools enforced strict language rules for students, where children were not permitted to speak Luganda in classroom settings at the upper primary level. Children who were called to answer questions or come to the board to write out a math problem were deemed failures for not being able to speak or write in English. Many children were observed by one of the researchers to be punished verbally or with a cane when speaking in their mother-tongue language. The stringent emphasis of children solely using English at upper primary levels can be attributed to the high-stakes English PLE, written in P7, which determines children's ability to continue on at the secondary level and will be elaborated on in the following section.

## **6. The implications of the language policy**

The use of a local language as the medium of instruction in rural areas is highly debated, where attitudes towards the policy vary significantly. Ironically, we have observed less enthusiasm and more concerns for local language policy in rural areas where it is intended to improve education quality. On the other hand, interviews with key informants (e.g. Ministry officials, NCDC, academics) praised the policy and expressed a firm belief in how it would lead to improvements in literacy and life skills. Likewise, the teachers interviewed in Kampala commended the language policy, and considered the use of English in multilingual contexts as a second best option. The opinions on the language policy, its implications and outcomes are elaborated below, by focusing on the main issues raised by the respondents: literacy acquisition, classroom participation, cultural expressions, transition to post-primary education, intensification of regional inequalities, ethnic segregation and national identity.

### **6.1. Acquiring literacy skills**

Teachers teaching at lower primary levels throughout both urban and rural areas recognised the pedagogical advantages of using local languages as the medium of instruction. They unanimously confirmed that it helped to improve children's literacy skills as children were able to remember words and concepts with ease and relate them to their own experiences in their local languages. Such improvements were also attributed to the use of phonetic teaching methods, such as using letter sounds and sound-symbols instead of letter names, as introduced in the Thematic Curriculum. In the Teso region especially, teachers expressed that this method is much easier to use while teaching in the local language. As a teacher remarked:



If the child hears a language at school that they already speak well, can hear, write and understand, they learn faster. They acquire concepts more quickly, and much more easily. They would be free to ask questions. So, use of child's own local language will help children to participate more in learning environments.

These findings correlate with similar findings in other contexts in Africa, such as in Cameroon (Trudell, 2005), Nigeria (Bamgbose, 2005), confirming that the use of mother tongue leads to increased literacy acquisition.

## **6.2. Classroom participation**

Language proficiency was found to largely determine the levels of children's participation in both urban and rural classrooms. In Kampala, many children in lower primary levels, who had pre-primary schooling, did not have adequate English comprehension to actively participate in the English classroom lessons and activities. The participation levels of those who had no pre-primary schooling or background in English was even lower; often observed as being quiet and isolated. In these urban schools, learning areas, such as *the News* and *the Story Time*, were positive attributions of the local language policy, allowing children the opportunity to speak in their local languages. A teacher's statement illustrates such practices:

In *the News*, I ask students to tell stories in their own language even if many in the class do not understand. I see that children who are telling a story are very lively and pleased to speak their local language. They are also more able of course to tell stories in their local languages. The ones who understand the language listen attentively and smile. The rest of us do not understand but still we enjoy listening to stories.

Teachers believed that such practices gave children the opportunity to express themselves in the classroom. Although children who were poor in English or did not speak Luganda were observed to be more passive, they become animated in learning areas that allow them to converse in local languages.

On the other hand, in rural areas, many teachers found the use of local language to be highly supportive of the Thematic Curriculum's new pedagogical approach, such as increased interactions among teachers and classmates and high levels of participation, as children were more eager to volunteer in demonstrations, role play activities and class performances (see Altinyelken, 2010b). Pupils could spontaneously engage in such activities when they used a familiar language, and asked questions to their teachers when they did not understand. Therefore, the majority of teachers identified that the use of local language improved children's participation in classrooms, and lessons were often described as more lively and enjoyable.

Of the one government-aided school visited, where the school did not follow the local language policy, lower primary classroom observations told a different story. In a P2 science class, the teacher wrote the material required on the board and read it aloud. In unison and with the same tone and emphasis the children passively recited the words back to him. 'Are we together?' he asked, 'Yes!' was always the answer. However, when the teacher asked the class questions regarding the material no children raised their hands to answer. The lesson continued where he repeated the same question over and over and through this repetition strategy children began to participate and raise their hands. As the teacher later discussed, 'with English, they need to memorize the words or else they will never learn.' In this context, the researcher recognized children as passive participants, highly disengaged with the lesson.

### **6.3. Parental involvement**

Another advantage of local language relates to parents' support. As one teacher in the Teso study explained, unlike in the case of English, the use of local language as the language of instruction allowed parents to be more involved in their children's education; responding to questions; and offering further support with homework assignments. In the context of Cameroon, Trudell (2005) also points out that the use of English as the language of instruction tends to exclude parents from their children's educational experiences. Hence, the influence of home and the family on children's education is minimised, while greater power is assigned to the teacher and education system in general. Moreover, Benson (2005) shows that the use of mother tongue helps to improve communication between parents and schools, and allows parents to participate more in school activities and decision-making.

### **6.4. Cultural expressions**

Apart from pedagogical advantages, teachers further recognised local language as an important expression of ethnic culture, which influences children's Ugandan and ethnic identities and overall sense of belonging. Community participation, empowerment and improving interactions between schools and the community were also discussed in relation to the local language policy. Outside of the classroom, all of children's school activities, games and play were conducted and expressed through local language. Moreover, various ethnic ceremonies and celebrations which take place in the community involved children's music, dance and drama performances conducted in local languages. As one teacher in Teso remarked, the local language policy also looks to improve children's language skills in their local languages. In this sense, the policy helps to maintain and even revitalise local languages and cultures.

## **6.5. Transition to post-primary education**

A major dilemma of the local language policy highlighted by various education stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and district officials was the PLE, administered in English at the end of P7. Because the medium of assessment is English, English proficiency has become critical to accessing post-primary educational opportunities. Within our rural studies, schools which disregarded the local language policy (private boarding schools and the one government-aided school in Bukomansimbi) argued that English as the medium of instruction was a vital component in preparing children for the English PLE. As explained in various interviews:

Using Luganda in lessons does not help. It does not help the learners because the P7 examination is set in English. If you teach in Luganda or the mother tongue language that pupil will not write the answer in English. Instead, the pupil will write the answer in Luganda and it will not be marked right. Also, the pupil will not be able to interpret or understand the question as they do not know the English words... eventually that will lead to total failing.

The reason [parents] really want English is that they are targeting the PLE and when the time comes for answering the questions, they are in English. They are very much interested in their pupils passing what? The PLE.

In further reign of the PLE, these schools also adopted their own assessment policies. Instead of administering end-of-term examinations in the lower primary level in the local language, as stipulated in the local language policy, they were set in English to help children practice and become confident in writing English examinations.

## **6.6. Intensification of regional inequalities**

Another concern highlighted by respondents, which closely relates to the PLE, was a growing urban-rural divide in educational attainments. Because children in urban areas receive their education in English beginning in P1, they were considered to have an advantageous position, and perform better in the PLE. Therefore, many respondents were concerned that the new language policy would intensify the social inequalities in terms of access to secondary education between rural and urban areas.

Because of these concerns, strong criticisms towards the local language were reported among parents and district officials, as many viewed teaching in local languages as a waste of time and energy. Some even considered it a ‘deliberate’ policy that would keep people in rural areas ‘backwards’. One Ministry official explained such concerns as follows:

Some people think that local language is made to keep rural population backwards.

Obviously people are complaining. Why do you want our teachers to teach in local languages and why urban areas teach in English? We could not do enough to sensitise public. We have not addressed these concerns properly.

Ministry officials persistently argued that such a divide would not be exacerbated by the language policy since rural schools will also teach English as a subject and be provided as the language of instruction as of P4. Such arguments were raised more frequently by officials and teachers teaching in Kampala. However, almost all teachers teaching in rural areas believed that the English language training provided to their pupils would not be sufficient to perform well on the PLE, hence, increasing rural inequalities.

## **6.7. Ethnic segregation, stereotyping and discrimination**

Furthermore, it was argued that the new language policy might inadvertently solidify ethnic segregation, and deepen ethnic stereotyping and discrimination. Some respondents argued that the local language policy would result in limitations to school choice and freedom of movement within the country. As recognised by teachers, for children who are not originally from the language and proficient in the local language they were forced to learn a second local language. However, the majority of parents did not want their children to learn a second local language as it is considered useless, or because of historical enmities among various ethnic groups.

Therefore, the local language policy was believed to potentially limit people's movement within the country and inadvertently lead to ethnically homogenous settlements and reinforcement of tribalism. Moreover, some teachers in Teso were concerned that local language policy might lead to communication problems and tensions between different tribes who do not understand each other's languages.

The concerns were also directly related to teacher language proficiency. The policy requires teachers who can teach in the local language of the region. Hence, there are some obvious consequences with regard to the posting, selection and promotion of teaching staff between districts, and even within counties and sub-counties (Ward et al., 2006). In accordance with the decentralisation policy, districts employ and appoint teachers. Some respondents argued that they often employed teachers from their own ethnic group. These respondents were concerned that the local language policy would intensify this trend as schools must appoint teachers who were fluent in local languages at lower grades. As becoming proficient in multiple local languages is not a priority amongst teachers, this automatically implies teachers would be employed from the same ethnic/linguistic group.

Consequently, there were apprehensions that opportunities for inter-group contact and associations would be less, as children would mainly interact with peers and teachers who are from their own ethnic/linguistic group. If various tribal, ethnic groups do not mix at school, some respondents argued it would be very difficult for the education system to teach respect for diversity and promote tolerance. In addition, teachers have been found to solely teach content surrounding their own cultures, traditions and religion, and their capacity to teach about other ethnic groups within Uganda is limited. Thus, the local language policy could potentially lead to further ethnic solidification and isolation.

### **6.8. National identity**

Another concern was related to national identity and promoting unity within Uganda. Some respondents suggested that the sense of national identity is not very strong in Uganda. Identity is strongly associated with one's tribe where people often defined themselves in relation to their tribe and religion, arguably the most important elements of social identity in Uganda. According to some respondents, the local language policy was perceived to weaken national identity, as outlined in the account below:

The local language policy does not promote national unity, it divides people. There are over fifty languages in this country. So nationalism cannot be taught with so many languages... the use of English as the official language brought some unity to this country since we could understand each other. This language really cemented national unity.

Therefore, some respondents were concerned that the use of multiple local languages as the language of instruction at schools might inadvertently lead to further divisiveness within the country. Similar arguments were raised in other African countries as well, such as Kenya,

although such arguments overlook the fact that the use of English also divides alongside class lines (Bunyi, 1999), as the choice of language is closely related to the distribution of power in a society.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study has confirmed that the use of local languages as the language of instruction has contributed to the improvement of literacy skills, as well as high levels of participation in children's learning. It has also helped to improve students' understanding of content as they were better able to retain words and concepts and relate them to their immediate lives and experiences. Many teachers in rural areas recalled times in the past when English was the medium of instruction and pupils could not write their names at P3. Now, they were proud to see that the majority of pupils were able to do so at P1. Furthermore, teachers recognised the significance of local languages in promoting cultural expression, identity and maintaining culture heritage.

Despite these gains, the local language policy has come under much scrutiny by teachers, school administrators, and parents in rural areas since many of them viewed the policy to impede on children's academic success in upper primary and secondary levels. Teachers believed that there is a low level of English language proficiency among pupils and that the primary English subject did not provide adequate English proficiency for students in upper primary levels. Moreover, it has rendered these pupils in a disadvantageous position for the PLE in comparison to pupils who studied in English in urban areas. For communities, parents and teachers alike, the transition to post-primary education and upward social mobility appeared to be the highest priority, for which English was seen as indispensable. As



Webb (1999) contends within the context of South Africa, it is difficult to introduce local languages as the medium of instruction when they have low status and a low economic value.

This article highlights some critical misconceptions and assumptions in language-in-education in both policy development and in local education practices and perceptions. A critical misleading assumption relates to the so called 'early-exit model', which characterises Uganda's local language policy and overlooks many of the socio-economic challenges that children face in their education experiences, specifically in rural areas. The 'early-exit model' assumes that a foreign language can be taught and learned as a subject in lower primary, where children can easily make the transition to English at P4 and have proficient English literacy and communication skills within upper primary levels. However, this model, as well as popular research studies, which advocate for local language as the medium of instruction in the first years of a child's schooling, is predicated on the assumption that children's basic school needs are being met and that children maintain consistent attendance and participation in schools. Nevertheless, our findings indicate that Ugandan children did not have proficiency to start having instruction in English at P4, thus the transition did not work as envisaged by policy makers. Teacher narratives pointed to a set of problems that have a negative impact on learning the English language such as absenteeism, large classes, hunger, disease and lack of teaching and learning materials. Hence, there is a significant mismatch between policy assumptions, and practices and attitudes at the local level. This is certainly not unique to Uganda. In many other African countries similar outcomes were observed, as in the case of South Africa (see Webb, 1999) and Nigeria (see Oladejo, 1993; Ufomata, 1999).

When comparing late-exit models, where children continued learning in a familiar language in upper primary and secondary levels, to early-exit models (see Alidou et al., 2006), studies found that late-exit models yielded better results. For instance, studies in Nigeria (Bamgbose, 2005) and Ethiopia (Mekonnen, 2009) have shown that academic

performances of pupils were much higher when they were able to study in a local language for more than two or three years. Furthermore, an experimental study in Guinea-Bissau and Niger (Hovens, 2002) suggested that students' academic results were better when schools introduced a second language as the medium of instruction gradually, spanning over a few years, rather than abruptly in one year, as Uganda's local language policy stipulates. Conversely, the evaluations of the longitudinal effects of a project implemented in Swaziland, Namibia, South Africa and Botswana, which used local languages solely in the first three years of primary schooling, indicated that there were no significant differences in learning achievement (Brock-Utne, 2010). Nevertheless, in many language-in-education policy developments 'late-exit models' have consistently been ignored. As Brock-Utne (2010) suggests, international donors, the publishing industry in the West, and African elite have invested interest in promoting English (or other colonial languages) and following western Early-Childhood Development models which sanction local language solely for the first few years of a child's schooling.

Moreover, this 'early-exit model' assumes that teachers themselves have a good command of English, know children's first language and have adequate proficient knowledge of English-teaching and language acquisition methodologies. Nevertheless, teaching a second language is a specialised field, similar to Mathematics. Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect that teachers who are trained in other subjects can also assist in teaching English (Qorro, 2009). As our research suggests, these assumptions related to the 'early-exit model' do not hold true in rural areas and instead create many language barriers as children move from lower primary to upper primary levels.

Furthermore, there is a common false belief that using English as the language of instruction is the best way to learn a language. There is a misconception here between learning a second language and having a language as the medium of instruction in schools.

This stems at the local level, where teachers argued parents want English to be used in all aspects of schooling. What research has shown is that the main objective is rather for children to learn how to speak English *well*. Similar misconceptions about English as the language of instruction have been found in Tanzania and South Africa (see Brock-Utne, 2010) and require greater sensitisation of the pedagogical benefits of local language as the medium of instruction in schools.

There are also great oversights in the relation between mediums of instruction and mediums of assessment. The medium of assessment is rarely considered in view of language-in-education policies and human rights. Yet, as this article demonstrates, how children are assessed plays a major role in how languages are used in the classroom and limits children's ability to continue on in their academic career, specifically in rural areas where children are disadvantaged in their access to learning and practicing English. Therefore, language-in-education requires review of the education system in its entirety; taking into account the various levels of education, and outcomes at the end of primary education. In other words, alignment between various education policies needs to be ensured to avoid some unintended consequences, such as the intensification of rural-urban divide. Such efforts require readjusting assessment models and adapting local languages as the medium of assessments at the PLE.

Furthermore, in support of language-in-education policies, this article also highlights additional implementation considerations, based on the challenges recognised in both urban and rural areas. First, further teacher-training on language acquisition and English-language methodologies, specifically in the context of multilingual classrooms is required. Second, investments on the development of literature, texts, instructional materials, teacher-training etc. for minority local languages need to be published and used for multilingual and bilingual teaching at all primary levels, embracing the various ethnic groups, cultures, customs, and

languages. Moreover, this article highlights how educational stakeholders, such as teachers and administrators, as well as parents and community members can have a large impact on the implementation of language policy reforms. Therefore, it is crucial to familiarise all stakeholders of the pedagogical advantages and cultural significance of instruction in local languages through large scale public awareness campaigns.

We believe that there is a strong need in Uganda to create an education environment which harmonises local language and English together in children's learning processes. Bi- or multilingual so-called 'late exit models', which promote *equal* spaces for language within schools in both instruction and assessment, offer one way to address such inequalities and reflects the socio-economic and cultural realities of Uganda. Late-exit bilingual models illustrate how languages can co-exist in schools and be mutually representational of English and local languages. Such a system does not sacrifice children's advancements and mastery of the global English language, but also does not impede education that is culturally relevant and significant in their everyday lives. Language policies need to be reflexive on the spaces and importance of different languages both economically, politically and socio-culturally.

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