International Journal of Educational Development 36 (2014) 90–99

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Development

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedudev

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

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Language policy
Medium of instruction
Policy implementation
English
Africa
Uganda

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.

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 inter-group conflict. Since the majority of countries are characterised by linguistic and ethnic diversity, language of instruction (LOI) 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 LOI 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 LOI in lower primary levels, specifically for rural areas. As gaps between the quality of education in urban and rural areas continue to expand, there is a critical need to review how language-in-education policies are mediated between the multilingual realities in 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. Based on four

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2013.11.001

separate research studies conducted in urban and rural contexts, this article seeks to provide a comparative analysis of the implementation of the local language policy in Uganda. The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is the language policy received by teachers and some other educational stakeholders in Uganda?
2. How is it practiced in urban and rural primary schools?
3. What are the major implementation challenges?
4. What social, political and economic implications of the language policy were identified?

The article is structured as follows: First, we will present an overview of the main debates on language-in-education policies in sub-Saharan African countries, and provide a historical review of language policies in Uganda. This will be followed by descriptions of our research design, the methods and the sample. Then, we will present the main findings of our studies by describing implementation profiles and challenges, and discussing diverse implications of the language policy from the perspectives of various actors. Finally, we will summarise the main findings and discuss their policy implications for Uganda and other similar contexts.

2. Debates on language-in-education in Africa

The languages of former colonial countries 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 (Ssekamwa, 1997). 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 recognise 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 LOI devalue and marginalise indigenous languages, knowledge and cultural identities. Knowledge no longer becomes transformative and empowering to students and communities alike, where English as the LOI 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[2] (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 LOI 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 LOI, or the language of assessment.

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. By contrast, 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).

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 paternalistic linguistic ideology, indigenous languages were also used in schools as the LOI to provide political stability against clashing ethnic rivalries. 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).

Uganda's independence in 1962 generated a contentious debate on 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. Today, most Ugandans negatively associate Kiswahili

[2] 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, p. 40).