Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
ScienceDirect
International Journal of Educational Development 28 (2008) 55–69
International Journal of EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedudev

Pedagogical renewal: Improving the quality of classroom interaction in Nigerian primary schools

Frank Hardman[a,*], Jan Abd-Kadir[a], Fay Smith[b]

[a]School of Educational Studies, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Vic. 3086, Australia
[b]Newcastle University, UK

Abstract

This study reports on an investigation of classroom interaction and discourse practices in Nigerian primary schools. Its purpose was to identify key issues affecting patterns of teacher–pupil interaction and discourse as research suggests managing the quality of classroom interaction will play a central role in improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in contexts where learning resources and teacher training are limited. The study was based on the interaction and discourse analysis of video recordings of 42 lessons and 59 teacher questionnaires from 10 States, drawn mainly from the north of Nigeria. The findings revealed the prevalence of teacher explanation, recitation and rote in the classroom discourse with little attention being paid to securing pupil understanding. The wider implications of the findings for improving the quality of classroom interaction in Nigerian primary schools through more effective school-based training are considered.

Keywords: Classroom interaction; Pedagogy; Teacher development; Sub-Saharan Africa

1. Introduction

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country with over 128 million people, 250 ethnic groups and 400 native languages. Although English is the official language, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Pidgin English are spoken on a regular basis. After 16 years of military rule, Nigeria adopted a new constitution in 1999 which saw a peaceful transition to civilian government. Despite some irregularities, the general election in April 2003 saw the first civilian transfer of power in Nigeria's history. Although Nigeria is a petroleum-based economy, its revenues have been squandered through corruption and mismanagement. It is a country of inequities with the richest 10% of the Nigerian population receiving just under half of the national income while the bottom 10% receive only 1.6%, and it is estimated that 60% of the Nigerian population are living below the poverty line, with many existing on less than 50 pence/day. The average life expectancy is 46 years and infant mortality rates run at 98.8 deaths out of every 1000 live births. As with other developing countries, Nigeria has a large percentage of children with 42% of the population aged 0–14 years.

Research shows that in less developed countries such as Nigeria, primary education plays a key role in development by increasing industrial productivity and agricultural innovation (Verspoor, 1989; Craig

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 3 9479 2650.
E-mail address: f.hardman@latrobe.edu.au (F. Hardman).

0738-0593/$ - see front matter © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2007.02.008

et al., 1998; Ackers et al., 2001). It has also been shown to bring positive social changes through lower fertility, lower infant mortality, better child health and education, and a reduction in gender inequality. However, policy on primary education reform has been poorly implemented due to rapid population growth, insufficient political will, undemocratic governance and poor management of scarce resources. Women and girls have been most affected by these negative factors. It is estimated that 7 million of Nigeria's children of primary age are not enrolled in primary school and about 4.3 million (62%) of these are girls. This equates to a national enrolment ratio of 74% for boys and 56% for girls, with large differences between the north and south of the country. The national literacy rate for females is only 56% compared to 72% for males, with wide geographical variations (UNICEF, 2002).

One of the main challenges facing Nigeria, therefore, is the improvement of its primary education system. Research by Scheerens (2000) and Verspoor (2003) suggests that in developing countries the influence of the school on pupil learning is more important than the effect of home and other external factors compared with developed countries Changing pedagogic practices suggests the need for powerful school-based professional development programmes as many teachers are unprepared or underprepared to teach and thus developmentally handicapped at the pre-service phase. Intervening at the school level and classroom level is seen as being crucial in raising the quality of primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa as ultimately educational quality is obtained through pedagogical processes in the classroom: through the knowledge, skills, dispositions and commitments of the teachers in whose care pupils are entrusted (Craig et al., 1998; Anderson, 2002; Verspoor, 2003). Therefore, managing the quality of classroom interaction is seen as the single most important factor in improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in contexts where learning resources and teacher training are limited (Carron and Chau, 1996; Alexander, 2000; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Farrell, 2002).

However, there is a paucity of data in Sub-Saharan Africa generally into how teachers actually teach in the classroom and the impact they are having on children's learning (Prophet, 1994; Stephens, 1997). The comparatively few studies that have been carried out show a teacher-dominated discourse. For example, evidence from Botswana (Fuller and Snyder, 1991; Prophet and Rowell, 1993; Rowell and Prophet, 1990; Arthur, 1996), Kenya (Cleghorn et al., 1989; Merritt et al., 1992; Bunyi, 1997; Ackers and Hardman, 2001; Pontefract and Hardman, 2005), Tanzania (O-saki and Agu, 2002); South Africa (Chick, 1996) and Nigeria (Onocha and Okpala, 1990), shows that teacher–pupil interaction often takes the form of lengthy recitations made up of teacher explanation and questions, and brief answers by individual pupils or the whole class. Attempts to change the teacher-centred, lecture driven pedagogy, which places pupils in a passive role and limits their learning to memorising facts and reciting them back to a teacher, appear to have had little impact on classroom practice (Anderson, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2004).

Research also suggests that in-service training (INSET), which builds on existing systems and structures and supports teachers' reflection on their own practice, can have a significant impact (Costa and Garmston, 1994; Joyce et al., 1997; Hopkins, 2002). It seems that for INSET to be effective, support needs to be provided to teachers to encourage them to reflect upon their beliefs and pedagogic practice, and to consider the implications of their classroom discourse practices and to explore alternatives. Therefore, teachers need opportunities to reflect and to try out new practices, ideally in a context where they can collaborate with supportive colleagues, to refine their practice.

The policy of teaching through the medium of English in former British colonial countries like Nigeria, with its large number of indigenous languages, is also seen as a exerting a major influence on the patterns of classroom interaction and presenting communication difficulties for both teachers and pupils (Arthur, 2001). Despite official policies stipulating the use of English in upper primary classrooms, code switching is reported to be common because of the disparity that frequently occurs between the teacher and pupils in proficiency in English as the language of instruction (Arthur, 1996; Bunyi, 1997).

International research into classroom discourse shows that in its prototypical form teacher-led recitation consists of three moves: an *initiation*, usually in the form of a teacher question, a *response* in which a student attempts to answer the question, and a *follow-up* move, in which the teacher provides some form of follow-up (very often in the form of an evaluation) to the pupil's response (Mehan, 1979;