



Muddling through: A critical review of Ugandan language policy in education

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Abstract

This article discusses the contradictions and paradoxes embedded in the implementation of the contemporary language policy in education in Uganda. The paper argues that language choice in education has depended largely on political interplay, balance of power and finances and less on pedagogical considerations influenced by underpinning forces that are antithetical to such down-up policies. The paper highlights that there is need to revisit the policy to achieve the intended goals by recognising the role of democracy, equity and equality aspects of language in education to break through the distribution of power relations to foster linguistic justice, emancipatory pedagogies, linguistic and cultural diversity and sustainability. Consideration of historical, social contextual and pedagogical issues based on scientific data are paramount rather than holding on to colonial policies, less relevant in today's contemporary Uganda. The article concludes that success of 'mother tongue' medium in school is preconditioned by the collapse of the status quo through democratisation and empowerment of local communities. They are to take ownership and target local needs rather than continued with current wasteful measures propagated by subtractive bilingual imperatives, which are counterproductive yet still compelled by neo-colonial and colonial leaders. A number of bilingual and total-endoglossic models are highlighted which may be further examined through contextual research. This may foster a more effective implementation of language use in education that could lead to the realisation of increased literacy levels, national unity, language and cultural sustainability as well as overall development of Uganda.

Key words: Cultural diversity, education policy, hegemony, linguistic sustainability, Uganda

Introduction

Uganda is a multicultural and multilingual nation with over 40 cultural groups recognised within the country. There are 13 major cultural groups which make up approximately 80% of the population, while the other cultural groups make up the remainder. These cultures include African, Europeans, Asians, and Arabs. The dominant language within Uganda is considered to be 'Luganda', with approximately 50% of the population who can speak the language. However, only 17% of the population consider it their 'mother tongue', first or arterial language (Juliet & Bonny, 2011). Luganda's status as an official language is still a matter of debate. Despite this, English and Swahili are still recognised as the official languages though both are considered 'foreign' in Uganda.

Due to the nature of the many Ugandan 'minority' languages, there is not a single language to unite the various cultural groups or used as the language of instruction in schools. To address and reconcile cultural conflict to promoting national unity, the Government of Uganda responded by making English the official language of instruction except in rural lower primary (class P1-P3) where the language of instruction remains the arterial or 'area language'. This was a result of the 1992 Government White Paper on Education (de Kemp, 2008).

While the intentions of the education language policy, within the Government White Paper on Education, were considered revolutionary, its practical implementation since its inception has been fraught with challenges. This paper intends to critically examine the complexities within the policy paper, while



focusing on the forces which impact its full realisation. Finally, a discussion on the way forward is presented and conclusion based on the arguments which are raised. Nevertheless, before discussing the complexities of the policy paper, it is appropriate to examine the context in which it has been implemented.

Historical background

To understand the contemporary issues of the education language policy and its implementation, a brief review and reference to the historical experiences which impact the decisions of today is undertaken. Uganda's colonial legacy still impacts on the function of education today. This colonial ideological predisposition can be traced as far back as the first interaction with Western missionaries, which changed the context of education, the wisdom and cultural outputs of the learning system. These colonial projects were delivered by missionary schools and were often introduced to help identify and mentor talent. In addition, the boarding schools played and still play a critical role in acculturating the students in a "systematic, frequently brutal form of denial of indigenous languages, knowledge and cultures" (Smith, 1999, p. 64).

This was evidenced through the relegation of and punishments for using local languages within education. In these settings students have a propensity to align their cultural and economic interests with those of the colonising group rather than their own society. As such, the 'dominant' values or culture played a role in an individual's behaviour (Kim, 2001). This is where dominant cultural characteristics are conveyed or reproduced through symbolic violence by the dominant society. This is achieved through pedagogic instruction and the misrecognition that the ritualised practices of cultural values are of the whole society (Bourdieu, 1986; Kwesiga, 1994).

The education introduced by missionaries as part of an evangelical and 'civilising mission' did not seem an end in itself. Buxton, a missionary from the Church Missionaries Society was indicated to say civilisation, seems to depict an acculturating process (a word coined by Malinowski), to produce an African that would be serviceable for the colonial project (Prah, 2002, p. 162). Indeed, the political, social and economic conditions in Europe at the time warranted such means, not for the benefit of the African, who were presumed to have had no souls in the dark continent, but it was for the interests of the West (Walter, 1989).

In this sense, colonial education was therefore a mechanism of hegemony over the local Ugandans; however it also created a new indigenous elite as education was only accessed by a very small segment of the population (Juliet & Bonny, 2011). It was at this juncture that the creation of a social class emerged which was non-existent in the traditional society. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the colonial project provided access for any people to break through the upper ranks on merit altering the status quo that was feudalistic in nature. The social class epitomised the interests of the West, rather than the masses, which can be argue to be still occurring in present day Uganda. Despite the 'four children ceiling' being eliminated and free education extended to all school age children in 1997 (de Kemp, 2008), the access to appropriately suitable education still remains restrictive. This is due to its unfamiliarity in its nature through the use of 'foreign' languages as the medium of education and imbalance which exists between rural and urban primary education.

Contemporary language policy in education

The Uganda language policy in education aims to advance bilingualism in the educational system (Government of Uganda, 1992). The policy envisages two bilingual models of second language acquisition to be used in the two primary classroom contexts. The first is an English medium *submersion model* adopted for the urban schools. In urban settings children go throughout the whole primary school cycle (P1-P7) with English as a medium of instruction. The second model is the *early exit model* in rural schools area. This model commences educating students using arterial or area language from P1 to P3. Then a transitional class to English occurs at P4, which finally shifts to an English medium of instruction from P5 and throughout the remaining primary school years.

Within the policy, six area languages were indicated to be used in rural areas. These include Luo, Luganda, Lugbara, Runyankole/Rukiga, Ateso/Akirimajong, Runyoro/Rutoro. These area languages are



arterial languages to large groups of the Ugandan population, while being a second language to many other cultural groups. However, these six principle languages do not include the whole population in Uganda. The arterial or area language policy in rural areas is not new; it is a policy which replicates the 1963 policy on language in education by the Castle commission, adopted in 1965. The 1965 policy added Runyakole/Rukiga to the five area languages that were initially identified by the 1944 Makerere conference on language (Ladefoged, Criper, & Glick, 1972).

In the current context, the six area languages are unable to function as area languages as the 1992 policy intended. The six languages in reality can no longer be considered area languages. For example, Luganda was previously considered to be used in the eastern part of the country; however this is no longer the case. Historically, Luganda was an imposed language on people of a different dialect but of the same language group (Juliet & Bonny, 2011).

In addition, the Basoga cultural group no longer accept to be linguistically dominated by other cultural groups; have increasingly worked toward language awakening; and have developed different areas of Lusoga language and culture (Nabirye & De Schryver, 2010). Conversely, the speakers of Iwo, Ateso and Akirimajong do not view themselves as a single entity of speakers. While the Acholi and Langi are progressively working to develop their individual languages. This is why in 2005 the Parliament of Uganda passed the inclusion of Lusoga, Rukonjo and Ateso and Akirimajong as separate languages raising them to nine area languages (NCDC, 2006). In addition, the western languages of Runyankole/Rukiga, Runyoro/Rutoro have been amalgamated to become Runyakitara, a wider language of communication. Nevertheless, there is some contestation among the different arterial language speakers which observe their languages being usurped under Runyakitara (Bernsten, 1998). Thus, as the six identified area languages within the language policy have evolved, developed and seek their own identity, this becomes problematic for ongoing policy implementation.

The urban-rural dilemma

As Ugandan society is multilingual it creates large complexities when implementing language policy across the country. Learners are raised in environments where the acquisition of various languages occurs informally and at times simultaneously. Within Uganda interactions are interwoven from complex inter-relations (Kate, 1999) through an agrarian culture. Migration and resettlements occur due to drought; movement for grazing; in search for fertile lands; intermarriages; political strife; and gaining urban employment. As a result, language development is not community based, but rather is dependent upon the individual and circumstance. They can informally learn a second and even a third language without learning English especially considering that some languages only differ slightly in dialect. In most cases, English is acquired formally at school in rural settings.

This leads to the urban-rural dilemma; where the populations from the two areas have been provided with different educational approaches, which creates inequity, inequality and linguistic injustice. Currently, the argument is urban populations are multilingually more complex due to large populations with many diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Juliet & Bonny, 2011). This necessitates the need to consider urban employee children and opting for English as a medium of instruction. However, it is argued that the current policy attempts to protect civil servant children, while disadvantaging those children who would benefit from using their local languages for instruction.

Another controversy is English is used by urban learners and arterial or area language by the rural learners, yet at the end of the primary cycle (P 7), both populations sit the same exams, which are administered in English (Juliet & Bonny, 2011). This scenario is viewed by rural parents as a disadvantage to their children particularly, since they all compete for similar opportunities in the job market after school (Altinyelken, 2010). As it is exam oriented and secondary education is the major goal of primary education, rural parents are opting for full English medium for their children which influences the rural schools to maintain English medium.

The situation is more problematic in rural areas where arterial or area language is used yet learners of other minority languages exist in the classroom or do not have the 'area' language as a second language (Juliet & Bonny, 2011). In situations where minority language learners exist, the likelihood for them to gain the benefits of 'Education for All' as part of the Millennium Development Goals as well as their rights to education is compromised. Teachers therefore are obliged to retain instruction in Eng-



lish, which creates disadvantage for those schools who adhere to the language policy where the arterial or area language medium is used.

The other cultures within Uganda, which have not been considered, are those of 'minority languages' who are very small populations who are maintained "linguistic minorities... [by the] nationalisms which exclude them" (Heller, 1999, p. 7). This can be demonstrated in Uganda, as these cultures are not provided the educational resources in their own language. As such, these linguistic minorities potentially are endangered to have their unique languages and cultures become extinct, as hegemonic policy warrant their language shift to an 'area' language and later, English within the classroom. It remains uncertain how the younger generations are likely to carry on these minority tribes if their interaction is moderated and diminished. The aspect of linguistic and cultural diversity and sustainability is constrained by the policies and are a sanctioned injustice or linguistic extinction (Blackledge, 2010).

Solution to the dilemma

It can be argued that all areas should work towards promotion of the arterial or area languages for education purposes, which would benefit both first and second language speakers. The urban children can also be able to reap benefits of bilingualism, cognitively, culturally, socially and linguistically when taught in the arterial or area language medium. This would lead to increased social returns in education investment due to contextualised learning as well as community empowerment since, regardless of background; all seek employment across areas of Uganda. The attainment of bilingualism may be an advantage as it would also enhance national unity, social integration and a sense of patriotism. As such, they will have greater cohesion between the various cultures and observe themselves beyond cultural boundaries (Blackledge, 2010). The use of these languages by minority language speakers would foster social cohesion and a sense of belonging. Despite this, in western societies "multilingual practices and skills have had an uneasy fit in the national and linguistic order.... and have often been seen as a threat to cultural unification" (Blackledge, 2010, p. 302).

The approach would also establish greater equity and equality between the rural and urban divide in terms of resource distribution in education. In addition, most parents prefer their children to learn through arterial languages rather than another local language. As such, a redistribution of resources would provide a greater benefit to the disadvantaged areas and consequently reduce the implication cost of the languages, enhance local publishing industry and increased language teachers who may not necessarily be native speakers. This would also ultimately lead to linguistic and cultural sustainability since it is in these local languages that cultural diversity is conserved.

The submersion model has been viewed as a barrier to knowledge acquisition (Brock-Utne, 2000) since direct submersion to English as the first language is viewed as unrealistic, and English may be a second or third language for most students. Such learners would still encounter the effects of learning through a non-familiar language. Hence struggling to comprehend the English language and then using it as a medium for learning other subjects (Altinyelken, 2010). Examples of this impact are also evidenced throughout some secondary and University students with lack of good comprehension in English, code switching and mixing, safe talk among others in the Uganda context. In addition, those who are taught in English exclusively have a propensity to fall behind or drop out of school (Blackledge, 2010).

It can also be argued that if English submersion was pedagogically productive then children in urban schools would over the years have continually performed better in English and generally in the curriculum compared to the rural counterparts. However, this has not been the case drawing from the primary leaving exams over the years. Therefore the aspect of time spent using the language as medium of instruction does not necessarily correlate to language competence as presumed (Brock-Utne, 2012a).

Complexities of the solution

The dilemmas outlined are a result of a number of forces that impact greatly on the implementation process, among them is the colonial legacy aspect. There is a propensity for policy makers to replicate policies of former colonial leaders and Uganda is no exception. It is difficult to understand why this occurs, however it has been argued current policy makers may be hesitant to alter the social status



quo due to a sustained fear for this social structural change (Bamgbose, 2000). Conversely, it has been stated that it is the influence of globalisation exerted through larger structural forces that are generally opposed to such language policies (Chango, 2011). As such, African governments may be influenced by hegemonic globalisation in so much that national decision-making, which are not of direct benefit to major global players may be quashed, which Chango (2011) considers recolonisation the last stage of imperialism.

It is argued, global economic forces are perceived as a major hindrance to the implementation of diverse languages within education while the cost implications too remain a challenge. However, several countries with language diversity, such as Ethiopia, have been successful. Of particular interest is Papua New Guinea, who with over 600 languages has succeeded to introduce and sustain 400 languages as linguistic mediums of instruction in primary school (Mishra, 2009). Thus, it is suggested that there is a colonial policy disposition of limiting arterial language in the early years of education, but this also benefits foreign publishers, donors, former colonial powers and the Ugandan government (Brock-Utne, 2012b).

It is this discourse of the government and other key global forces, such as donor countries, publishers and former colonial powers which impose their power, hegemony and ideologies on language policies (Van Dijk, 2001). It is by identifying these processes that the population are empowered, given a voice and exposing social inequality within Uganda. By identifying these issues and challenges it gives weight to right social wrongs and propose change within such discourse as language policies to influence positive change (Billig, 2003; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000).

Discussion

Although the current policy corresponds with the theories which support arterial language for instruction in the early years, pedagogically it has greater and more meaningful learning outcomes (Blackledge, 2010). It also acts as a foundation for second language development. The policy assumes learners have attained a capacity to use the first language for educational attainment by Primary four (P4). However, research from Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa indicate that the transfer to another linguistic medium, such as English, should take a much longer time. Six to eight years in well-resourced classrooms and more years in less resourced classrooms has been indicated best practice in contexts such as Uganda.

This asserts a switch at the fourth year can be detrimental to the learners as learners, at this point will not have attained a well-developed spoken and written proficiency in both languages. Zubeida (2003) in her study in the townships in South Africa, found a similar situation were learners would neither acquire English effectively nor develop proficiency in their arterial language. This study highlights that implementation of language policies in education have to critically be analysed and informed by current research placed in contexts, signifying that even with inclusion of local languages it potentially may result in detrimental outcomes. Such research of current bilingual models used in most African countries, like Uganda, where the transition to a second language as early as possible has been inefficient and at times counterproductive.

Nevertheless, scholars such as Kathleen et al. (2006), offer linguistic transition models which may provide some solutions. The first model indicates arterial language can be used throughout school while English (L2) is taught as a subject by expert teachers. Research drawn from South Africa demonstrates that arterial language (L1) speakers of Afrikaans had become highly proficient in English when English was taught by experts as a subject for one lesson per day. However some findings suggest that without being embraced by or involving all stakeholders and without a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach, such a model may still not deliver expected outcomes.

The other model that has been shown to be relevant for the African context is *additive bilingual education*. This was part of the IFE project in Nigeria, which used arterial language as a medium of instruction for at least six to eight years (grades), with English taught by expert teachers. This was later followed by dual instruction from grade 8-12 (Kathleen et al., 2006). The last model, which was considered applicable for the African context, is a very late exit transition to English (L2) model. It was developed from a study in South Africa, where eight years of education in arterial language occurred with a transition to English in the ninth year of school. Learners achieved high scores in English language and within other areas of the curriculum. A similar study in Ethiopia showed that learners using arterial



language for instruction for eight years with English as a subject, performed better than those learners who used arterial language for four to six years (Blackledge, 2010; Kathleen, Benson, Bogale, & Yohannes, 2007).

Conclusion

Sociolinguistic factors, attitudes towards local and foreign languages, historical factors, and balance of power have a propensity to be major factors that impact on execution of policy planning and implementation in Uganda. The factors discussed have instigated planners and implementers to derive ill-conceived objectives, untenable theories, ill-adopted curricular and inappropriate pedagogical methodologies. It is apparent that solutions to language in education problems have to be approached from this historical point of view. Hence, providing the youth of Uganda with the capacity for service and life in the local community is a major goal of primary education.

As such, traditionalism is not advocated, rather the paper simply emphasises a realignment of the education system is required, which is geared toward holistic societal development. A readjustment which has social returns on investment in education, which will liberate a critical mass of creative energies, empower the individual and community and overall boost the social and economic development of the country. This cannot be done without empowering the languages of society. The above argument sums up two contrasting power relations promoted as a result of the colonial project, on one part, those that hold the power and beneficiaries of the existing status quo (the elite) and those that do not and are disadvantaged by the existing status quo (the masses). The goal of policy should be focussed on making changes to the status quo which has been viewed as an uphill struggle since the cohort entrusted with this mission is the very cohort that has the most to lose.

It is purported the elite see local languages as having no role in today's world; they observe that a move to African languages would be in a way to lose out from the global advantages. They observe English as having an over edge since it provides cultural neutrality, high prestige, ready-made educational materials and a medium of international communication. Conversely, the masses see English as a language of technology, high social status, power, knowledge and a path to sound employment while arterial languages are viewed as having a low status (Blackledge, 2010; Kate, 1999; Ochieng, 2012). These attitudes in no doubt have been constructed by ongoing global and colonial hegemony, however one way to support the policy is by changing these attitudes held about both English and local languages.

English has been tested as a first language for decades but results have exhibited the same educational malfunctions to individuals as well as society. It is time to realign and re-consider English in its true sense as a second language. English does not need to be discarded, however it must be understood that it does play a role in framing language policies in education that impact negatively on the majority of learners. The aspect of mastering English at primary level as a first language has not been indicated to be the best option regarding proficiency; particularly where it may play a role as a second or third language. One of the major aims of formal education is to develop the power of critical thinking; this skill is less developed in a foreign language, especially when the language may only be encountered in the classroom. This situation may lead to detrimental effects on children since their childhood experiences may not be readily expressed in such a language, which may stifle a child's imagination, thought and persistence to continue to learn (Brock-Utne, 2000).

As such, local languages are paramount especially in promoting the appropriate intellectual growth of children. Development of literacy of an arterial language is also a foundation for second language acquisition as well as a child's social cultural and self-awareness. More importantly, as a large number of children do not reach secondary school, what education they do receive would be more serviceable to their communities especially if they are literate in at least their local language. Primary education should make a child comfortable to live and serve in their community rather than being disadvantaged or alienated. Research has shown that many children are not literate in a local language or English by the end of their primary education which creates ongoing and perpetual individual and social disadvantage (Altinyelken, 2010).

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