

“HAVE POLICY MAKERS ERRED?” IMPLICATIONS OF MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION FOR PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOLING IN UGANDA

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The Uganda language-in-education policy is silent about pre-primary schooling. This level of education is largely in the hands of private individuals who, because of wide-spread misconceptions about learning and acquiring English in Uganda (as in many other African countries), instruct pre-primary school learners in English. This article demonstrates how this omission in language-in-education policy is creating competition between rural government and private schools regarding the teaching of English and the development of initial literacy. The absence of an official language policy for pre-primary schooling has also dichotomised the implementation of mother tongue education in rural areas. The policy allows rural primary schools to use mother tongue as language of learning and teaching in the first three school grades. However, whereas private schools instruct through English only, government schools to a large extent adhere to the policy, albeit with undesirable consequences. The practical implications of lack of a language-in-education policy for and minimal government involvement in pre-primary schooling are discussed in this article.

Keywords

Language policy; mother tongue education; initial literacy; early childhood development; education in Uganda

INTRODUCTION

‘We have pushed the policy too far, expecting even infants to learn through English.’ (Kyeyune, 2003: 174). In this quotation, Kyeyune reflects on how Ugandan policy makers have made it possible to use English at the preschool as the exclusive language of learning and teaching (LoLT). The language-in-education policy in Uganda (Government of Uganda, 1992; Ministry of Education and Sports, 2004) is silent about this level of education. Due to lack of direct government involvement at this level of schooling, Ugandan preschool children are instructed in English, even in the rural areas where the language-in-education policy specifies that the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in the three school grades following on preschool (P1 to P3) should be one of the other tongues (MT) spoken in that region. In this paper, I present evidence to indicate that the practices at pre-primary¹ school level comprise an impediment to the successful implementation of MT education, particularly in rural schools, where rural government schools do not offer pre-primary education while rural private schools do.

The formal education system in Uganda is consistently cited to include seven years of primary education (P1 to P7); four years of lower secondary education (Ordinary level); two years of upper secondary education (Higher School Certificate) and three or five of

University education (UBOS, 2007; Uganda National Examinations Board, 2011). This four-tier model excludes pre-primary schooling, and yet pre-primary schooling has been offered for many years now in the country. For all the education levels cited above, English is the official language of instruction and examination, apart from P1 to P3 in rural areas where MT education is prescribed.

Note that although pre-primary schooling has not been formally recognised by the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), the Government of Uganda (Government of Uganda, 1992) recognises that preschools exist in the country and that they are privately run on a commercial or voluntary basis. Aware that most private schools in Uganda have preschool sections, I sought to enquire on the status of recognition of preschools by the MoES. In this regard, I engaged in email correspondence with the MoES in September 2012. A designated official, L. Nakijoba (personal communication, September 30, 2012) stated that the MoES has ‘developed an ‘Early Learning Framework’ (a syllabus) and a ‘Caregivers’ Manual’ (or teachers’ guide) which is now the recommended syllabus and caregiver, nursery teacher’s guide in the nursery schools. MoES is trying to compile a list of nursery training institutions and we now inspect them – so yes, nursery education is now recognized.’ There is also evidence on the NCDC website (www.ncdc.gov.ug/educ.html) to indicate that preschool education has begun to receive government attention. The available Early Childhood Development (ECD) policy (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2007) is but concerned with structural mechanisms, e.g. establishment guidelines and inspection. What is at stake now is the necessity and urgency of formulating a language-in-education policy running from pre-primary linking up to primary; and making ECD a compulsory level of education to all Ugandan children.

At the time of introducing MT education in 2006/2007, there were preschools running in both rural and urban schools. As stated above, however, the language-in-education policy does not consider pre-primary schooling. In addition, since most preschools are owned by private individuals, and all are attached to private schools, teaching at this level of education is conducted in English. It should also be noted that there is no uniform preschool curriculum in Uganda. In addition, pre-primary schooling or ECD is not a compulsory level of education before entering primary school (Ejuu, 2012; Uganda Child Rights NGO Network, 2006). The next section provides an overview of how pre-primary schooling (henceforth also ECD) is conducted in Uganda. Hereafter, I will give an exposition of some linguistic practices in ECD classes, after which I will briefly discuss a study that I conducted to determine how teachers understand and manage the process of transitioning from MT to English as language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in Ugandan rural schools. Although ECD classes fell outside the scope of this study, the classroom observations as well as informants clearly indicated that ECD practices in Uganda pose challenges to MT education in rural primary schools. Such ECD practices thus warrant separate reporting in order to point out the weight of implications that this level of education has for the implementation of the MT education policy in Ugandan primary schools. In sum, based on the findings reported here, the article aims to provide answers to two questions: (i) what effect does the presence and/or absence of preschooling have on MT education in Uganda? And (ii) how would a pre-primary language-in-education policy enhance MT education in Uganda?

PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOLING IN UGANDA: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

Commenting on a study amongst linguistic minority children of 690 families in America (cf. Fillmore, 1991), Lee (1996: 515) contends that early childhood education is often ignored in language research. He argues that

One must consider the far reaching implications of this study. Children as young as 3 and 4 years of age are indeed susceptible to external and internal assimilative forces to learn English. They quickly recognize upon entering preschool, particularly when curriculum is presented in English, that English proficiency provides a link to social communication and acceptance. Ultimately, children's L1 is often displaced by English, which might be quite damaging cognitively, given that many children abandon their L1 before developing communicative competence and adequate proficiency in L2.

Lee's observations suggest that the LoLT at ECD level should be handled with care as using a second language (L2) as LoLT has the potential not only to affect the cognitive development of children negatively but also to result in language loss, where a MT or first language (L1) is replaced with an L2. Research has also indicated that children find learning difficult when content is presented to them in a non-familiar language (see, e.g., Ball, 2011; Barron, 2012; Benson, 2008; Cummins, 2005; Fafunwa, Macauley, & Sokoya, 1989; Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey & Pasta, 1991). For these and other reasons, Barron (2012), World Bank (2011) and Premsrirat (2010) have observed that for ECD to be successful, instruction should be in the children's MT.

In the next paragraphs, I discuss observations made by a private NGO, Uganda Child Rights NGO Network (UCRNN) (Uganda Child Rights NGO Network, 2006), and Ejuu (2012), who have reported on pre-primary schooling in Uganda. Ejuu (2012) has observed that there is insufficient data on ECD in Uganda to inform policy. Furthermore, pre-primary education in Uganda has grown tremendously in the recent past. UCRNN observes that this growth of preschools is motivated by working mothers and a lack of readily available home-based caregivers. In spite of the tremendous growth of preschools, UCRNN (2006: vi) observes that '[f]ormal learning opportunities for children below the age of six remains limited with vast majority of children 3-5 years not having access to any form of pre-primary schools. Pre-primary education is characterized by lack of policy guidelines as attested by the existence of Boarding Nursery Schools.' Even though boarding pre-primary centres have no official educational status, due to lack of direct government involvement in this level of education, there are a number of such boarding pre-primary schools in both urban and rural Uganda.

UCRNN (2006: vi) found that the responsibility for providing pre-primary education is largely taken up by the private sector. Even though the government of Uganda handles the licencing of ECDs, there are many preschools in both urban and rural areas that are not known to government authorities and that are, therefore, not controlled by government policies, possibly in part because pre-primary education is not compulsory and not a priority area to government (cf. Ejuu, 2012). Kajubi (1989) had recommended to government to pay attention to policies on ECD, but as yet the Uganda government has not put in place language-in-education policies to guide education at pre-P1 level (cf. Ejuu, 2012). Furthermore, UCRNN (2006: 3) notes that all but one (Kyambogo University) preschool teachers' training institutions in Uganda are privately owned. This implies that there might be less control over the quality of education offered. Moreover, there is limited research concerning this critical level of education in Uganda (Ejuu, 2012).

Regarding the ECD curriculum, UCRNN's survey and Kitembo (2008) explain that, as stated above, there is no unified curriculum for preschools in Uganda. Accordingly, private NGOs and faith-based organisations have their own curriculum, e.g. Madrasa Resource Centre Uganda (2009), and all are offered in English. Because of a lack of such a curriculum, some

schools are using the primary school curriculum to instruct their preschool learners. In this regard, the UCRNN states that

Nursery education is basically aimed at stimulating a child to education in preparation to enrolment into primary school and should never be construed as leeway for usurping enjoyment of their rights to play, to leisure, etc. The only ethically defensible criterion for determining school entry is whether the child has reached the chronological age of school. (Uganda Child Rights NGO Network, 2006: 6)

UCRNN's observation points to two issues. The first is that a preschool child should not be exposed to academic learning. It is, however, not uncommon to find preschool children in Uganda attending to school homework, holiday work, and promotional exams. The second is that chronological age should determine school entry. In Uganda, age at school entry is still a contentious issue. Children are taken to ECDs between the ages of 2 and 4. At times, it is their academic competence rather than their chronological age that determines when they progress to primary school.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CURRENT PRACTICE IN UGANDAN PRESCHOOLS AND THEIR POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES

As mothers increasingly work outside of the home, the majority of Ugandan children enter pre-primary schools at the age of 3 years (and sometimes at 2 years). In the past, it was customary for urban families to employ out-of-school primary-school aged rural girls as babysitters. With the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Uganda in 1997, very few such girls are now available as house helps; and ECD centres are now taking the place left by these babysitters, particularly in urban areas. Since it is becoming fashionable in Uganda to speak English, some parents have a desire to see their children learn English as fast and as early as possible. Moreover, fluency in English is a prerequisite and the gatekeeper to P1 entry in prestigious private schools in Uganda. For these reasons and as the current language-in-education policy is silent about pre-primary schooling, the LoLT at this level is English in both rural and urban schools, even for infants (cf. Kyeyune, 2003). Recall that there are boarding preschools in Uganda and that children join these schools at the age of 3 years or younger. Not having mastered their MT yet, they are at risk of losing their MT in favour of English, especially as it is the practice of many boarding schools in Uganda not to allow children to speak their MT.

Moreover, as UCRNN points out, children in preschools are taken to school as early as 07:00 and are often only collected from school after 17:00 or 18:00 when parents return from work. As such, time for interaction with their parents is limited. If these parents wish for their children to be fluent speakers of English (amongst other reasons because they know that their children will be interviewed in order to ascertain whether they are fluent enough to enter English-only primary schools), then such parents often frequently address their children in English once their children have mastered English or even so that they increase the rate at which they pick up the language.

Whereas these practices may lead to apparent fluency in L2 in the longer run, especially the practice of using an L2 as LoLT from a very early age may have negative consequences for children as has been shown to be the case elsewhere in countries that have moved away from MT education in the early years. For instance, Fillmore (1991: 341) reports that minority children who were entering English-only schools between the ages of 3 and 4 years in America were losing their L1, and that the earlier they started school, the more of their L1

they lost. Fillmore (1991) also discusses language erosion due to early school-based L2 learning in Vietnam: Vietnamese-speaking children who enter English-medium schools at ages of 4 and 5 years after some time lose their L1 and only communicate in English, even to their parents. Although this may seem desirable to some parents, Fillmore (1991: 343) asks three pertinent questions in this regard: ‘What are the cognitive and educational consequences of losing one’s primary language? What happens to familiar relations when the language children give up happens to be the only language that the parents speak? What is lost when children and parents cannot communicate easily with one another?’ Moreover, evidence in the field of bilingual education has advanced that learners such as these may in the long run lose what appears to be competence in their L2, and some language skills that they had in their MT before consistent exposure to their L2 are also lost (e.g. see Lee, 1996; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2011). Given these research findings, the above questions posed by Fillmore (1991: 343), and Fillmore’s (1991: 325) argument that a learner’s primary language must play a central role in his/her learning – it ought not be neglected otherwise learning will be greatly affected – it appears that a well-founded language policy that guides pre-primary schooling in Uganda is needed.

There are particular realities in Uganda which would result in more benefits to the country if local languages were developed and allowed more space in education. For instance, even as Ugandans appreciate the place of English nationally and internationally, the media, trade, many formal work places and other social settings still require use of local languages (cf. Rosendal, 2010). Although local languages are strongly entrenched in such contexts, if they are neglected in education during the formative ages, language loss can occur in the long run – especially given that children enter school at an age when they have not fully mastered their MTs.

UCRNN (2006: 6) found that in the majority of preschools in Uganda, ‘[t]here is an acute shortage of qualified teachers in schools. This manpower gap has been bridged by primary seven and senior four leavers who for known reasons fail to continue with education.’ This means that some preschool teachers are not qualified to teach. UCRNN adds that few people enrol for pre-primary teachers’ education, and as a consequence, the limited numbers of qualified pre-primary teachers are hired expensively. This explains why many schools opt for cheap labour by employing untrained P7 and senior four level leavers. This practice can, however, have far-reaching implications for the process of acquiring English in Uganda: Those teaching children upon school entry are not qualified to do so, and these children are exposed to poor language models in their process of acquiring English. This current practice is undesirable in light of Fafunwa *et al.*’s (1989) statement that during the critical age of 0 to 12 years children must receive the best of the available teachers to motivate them and serve as models to them in their formative years. Kennedy, *et al.* (2012: 318) have also observed that ‘in early childhood, young children (aged 3 and 4 years) are in the process of developing critical higher mental functions, e.g. the ability to memorise, to pay attention, to reason, to think, to imagine’, so, it is only proper that such abilities are developed in the language that children are fluent in.

Kisembo (2008) discusses the consequences of not having distinct curricula for primary and pre-primary levels. He notes that the lower primary curriculum is almost similar to that of preschools; recall that it is currently a common practice for preschools to make use of the available primary school curriculum. This means that if a primary school has a pre-primary section, a learner who is promoted to P1 would be subjected to curriculum content already covered in the pre-primary years. Kisembo (2008: 5) has referred to this as a ‘wastage of time

for such pupils'. The above practices have undesirable consequences for the development of language and learning by children. In the next section, I discuss language-related matters pertaining to age of school entry.

THEORETICAL BASIS: AGE OF SCHOOL ENTRY AND LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

The age at which children report to school is central to their learning and L2 acquisition (cf. Collier, 1987; Cummins, 2000b): Age at school entry has a direct effect on language acquisition, but level of L1 proficiency at school entry also influences L2 acquisition. For learners to be able to acquire their L2 with limited difficulty, their L1 should have been developed up to a certain level, as a well developed L1 aids the development of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in the L2.

Another factor that determines L2 proficiency, according to Thomas and Collier (1997: 39), is formal schooling in L1. They explain that 'of all the student background variables, the most powerful predictor of academic success in L2 is formal schooling in L1' (cf. also Cummins & Genzuk, 1991; Ramirez *et al.*, 1991; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2011). They further observe that 'students schooled in L2 do not sustain the gains they made during the elementary school years, when compared to what a typical native-English speaker gains across the years' (Thomas & Collier, 1997: 36; see also Skutnabb-Kangas, 2011, who reports on India). Thomas and Collier (1997: 41) warn that 'when we teach only English language, we are literally slowing down a child's cognitive and academic growth, and that child may never catch up to the constantly advancing native-English speakers'. In this regard, referring to the importance of MT to bilingual children's education, Cummins (2001: 17) states:

Any credible educator will agree that schools should build on the experience and knowledge that children bring to the classroom, and instruction should also promote children's abilities and talents. Whether we do it intentionally or inadvertently, when we destroy children's language and rupture their relationship with parents and grandparents, we are contradicting the very essence of education.

With these words, Cummins emphasises that when education is not given in the language of a learner, the education may appear removed from their own experience and thus foreign to the learner. Furthermore, it should be noted that at the time of school entry, children are interacting with older siblings and adults who are more fluent in their L1 than the children. During this interaction, children are exposed to language input that can increase their L1 vocabulary and communication skills. Such an environment of language exposure should be provided at school too so that the L1 language development of the learners is not interrupted, because when childhood language development is interrupted, there is a possibility of a child losing the already acquired skills, be it in L1 or L2 (cf. Cummins, 1992). In short, this calls for creating a home-school continuum in which learners can develop their language skills uninterrupted.

METHODOLOGY

This paper forms part of an ethnographic multi-methods survey which was conducted to determine how teachers understand and manage the process of transitioning from MT as LoLT to English as LoLT in Ugandan schools. The pre-primary school level initially fell outside the scope of the study, but during the course of data collection, it became apparent that pre-primary schooling poses a challenge to MT education in rural schools and that it

warranted separate reporting in order to point out the implications that this level of education has for the successful implementation of the MT policy in primary schools in Uganda.

Ten schools were involved in this study: two government and two private from the rural Rakai district; four government schools from the rural Oyam district, and two schools (one government and one private) from Kampala, the capital of Uganda. The study involved the use of teacher questionnaires (on language diversity of learners and teachers, language policy and practice in Uganda, linguistic practices in the classroom, language teaching strategies, preparation for and/or assistance with transitioning from MT to English as LoLT and elicitation of teachers' suggestions on how to improve the implementation of the MT policy and thematic curriculum), classroom observations, follow-up teacher interviews, and analyses of Ugandan language-in-education policy documents. Teacher interviews (a total of 8) were conducted in all ten schools and classroom observations (a total of 36 instances) were conducted in the four schools in Rakai district only. Data analysis was done in a triangulated way in order to draw connections and disconnections between what teachers' reported, what was observed in schools and what was stated in policy documents. Data collection occurred in the period September to November 2012.

Throughout this study, I adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities), Stellenbosch University, and the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST). As it is an ethical requirement to have an information form explaining to participants the objectives of the research as well as any possible risks and/or benefits that may come out of the research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), a letter and a consent form were attached to the front of every questionnaire, and all participating teachers signed the form, agreeing to complete the questionnaire as well as to allow me to observe their classroom activities and/or to participate in an interview (see Creswell & Clark, 2011). The data reported here was collected from four rural schools: two government owned, school A and B; and two privately owned, schools C and D in Rakai district. Permission to access each school was obtained from head teachers (for government schools) and school directors or owners (for private schools).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the questionnaires and interviews, it transpired that government school teachers regard private school learners as better off than those in government schools because they have more years of learning English, especially since learners in private schools have attended (English-medium) preschools. In addition, from the classroom observations, it was evident that learners in rural government schools struggled with beginning to learn to read and write (Ssentanda, 2014) for the first time (having not attended pre-primary) while those in rural private schools had overgrown such challenges having attended pre-primary. The teachers' interview insights and classroom observations are each, in turn, discussed below to reveal (i) how the presence of pre-primary schooling in rural private and lack of the same in rural government schools makes MT implementation disjointed, (ii) how the lack of an MT policy in pre-primary complicates MT teaching, and (iii) how the absence of pre-primary schooling makes the P1/P2 prescribed teaching and learning difficult as teachers have a dual challenge: teaching pre-primary and P1/P2 content simultaneously as will be discussed in more detail below.

Insights from teachers' interview narratives

In the sections that follow, I present and discuss selected extracts from a representative interview with a P5 teacher in a rural government school (school B) in Rakai district which illustrates that rural private school learners are better off than those in government schools. This interview was conducted in Luganda (see bold text) and an English rendition is provided in bold italicised type. The teacher's turns are indicated with a T and the interviewer's with an MS.

Extract

- ¹T: Challenge w'ejjira, kwe kuba nti wamma private schools ate ekitali wano, bo abaana bali basomera emyaka, Oluzungu wano nga kati mu P1 w'atandikira okulusoma wano, aba alusoma mwaka gusooka.
Where the challenge comes in is, for the private schools, something which is not here, the other children study English for some years. But here a child comes to P1 to learn it for the first year [time].
- ²MS: Bano aba wano?
Do you mean children here [viz. the interviewed teacher's school]?
- ³T: Yee. Ate oli, ne bwe luba Luganda, ate oli ng'owessomero kati nga bw'ogambye nti school D, aba alusoma mwaka gwakusatu, ebigezo ate ne bigenda bijja kumpi nga bye bimu.
Yes, even if it is Luganda, a learner of that school like school D [viz. a rural private school in Rakai district] would be learning it for the third year, and then exams come looking almost similar.
- ⁴MS: Mhm.
Yes.
- ⁵T: N'eno ku end nga bijja kujja bye bimu, ng'oli asoma mwaka gwamwenda ng'ono asoma gwamusanvu.
Even at the end, they will be similar exams. The other learner would be in his/her ninth year whereas this one here is in the seventh year.
- ⁶MS: Olw'okuba nti bali balina nursery.
Because the other schools have nursery.
- ⁷T: Mhm. Tebasobola kukwatagana.
Yes, they cannot be the same.

In turn 1, the teacher states that there is a challenge when it comes to number of years of learning English: government school learners begin to learn English for the first time in P1, whereas P1 learners in private schools are learning English for their third or fourth year depending on the number of years they spent in preschool. In turns 3 and 5, the respondent explains that it is unfair that these two groups of learners have to sit similar exams at the end of term and at the end of primary school. The respondent explains that a P7 learner in a private school would be in his/her ninth year of schooling whereas one in a government school would be in his/her seventh year. The respondent adds (see line 7) that this creates a disparity and therefore, these learners cannot be expected to be at the same level of competency. Gardner (2012) reports on a British Council Survey conducted in 1999 in which it was found that, in many countries, the learning of English starts at the age of 8 years in government schools but at a younger age for private school children. The findings of the present study concur to an extent with those of Gardner.

- ⁸MS: So kati tulinga abalina systems ebbiri. Kati private schools zo ziringa ezimala emyaka omwenda?
So it appears as though we have two systems. Private schools appear as though they spend nine years [teaching English]?
- ⁹T: Mhm, nze nange era ndaba nga mu myaka mulimu okucheatinga. Ono azze mu P1 tamanyi nti ‘a’ y’efaanana bw’eti, oli w’ajjira mu P1 ng’asobola okuyunga ekigambo ‘mata’ ka tugeze. Asobola okuwandiika ekigambo nti ‘mata’ ono tamanyi nti oba ‘a’ ebeera etya!
Yes, I also notice that in the number of years, there is cheating. This one comes in P1 without any knowledge of how ‘a’ looks like. By the time the other comes in P1, they can write the word ‘mata’, for example. S/he can write the word ‘mata’ whereas this one does not know what ‘a’ looks like!
- ¹⁰MS: Tagimanyi.
S/he doesn’t know.
- ¹¹T: Tagirabangako.
S/he has never seen it.
- ¹²MS: Kwe kugamba wano P1 oba osomesa ebya nursery eby’emayaka ebiri, ate n’ebya P1 byennyini.
That means in P1 here one is teaching the matter for the two years of pre-primary and that of P1.
- ¹³T: Ate n’ebya P1 bye tuba tuliko. Naye abantu badda eyo boogera bingi ku masomero nga gano aga gavumenti naye ey’ensonga tebagirowoozangako, teri yali agirowoozezzaako wabula bo bakanya kuvuma buvumi nti teri mulimu gukolebwa naye nga tekisoboka, tetusobola kukwatagana.
Including the P1 content which we are handling at that time. But people do not think about all this when they are talking about these government schools; nobody has ever thought about this, people simply abuse us saying we do not do any work here but the truth is, we cannot be the same, our performance cannot be similar.
- ¹⁴MS: Eeh, temusobola.
Yes, you cannot be similar.

In turn 9, the teacher refers to what he believes is ‘cheating’, namely that there are apparently two systems of education running concurrently. He explains that a P1 learner in a government school enters school in P1 without basic literacy skills such as alphabet knowledge, yet a private school learner joins P1 when they already know some syllables and can write short words. The respondent explains in turn 13 that in a government school, P1 teachers handle pre-primary school content together with the content meant for P1 (as their P1 learners generally did not attend pre-primary), something that appears to be challenging for the teachers. This teacher believes that the public is not aware of this challenge and simply blame government school teachers for not doing their work well. Even though teachers in government schools struggle to teach these learners content which should have been taught in preschool and at the same time start them off with the primary curriculum, public expectation in Uganda is that P1 learners in government schools be at the same standard as learners in private schools. Because national assessments indicate that learners in private schools fare better than those in government schools, the public believes that government schools do not teach well. In Uganda, this perception is mostly based on learners’ ability to speak English – because of longer exposure to English, learners in private schools have better spoken English abilities than those in government schools. Consequently, parents prefer to enrol their

children in private schools. Classroom observations and teacher interview in Rakai district have revealed the following grade sizes:

Table 1: Number of learners per grade in government and private schools in rural Rakai district

Grade	School A (government)	School B (government)	School C (private)	School D (private)
P1	24	34	90	47
P2	14	36	87	65
P3	17	44	104	84
P4	6	35	92	71
P5	10	27	75	70

Note that the grade sizes in the government schools are not smaller due to a lack of physical facilities or due to capping of learner numbers. The government schools do not deny learners entry and also do not have entry requirements for P1, whereas the private schools do. As explained in turn 15 hereafter, for learners to obtain a place in private schools, they must first sit for an interview. Such entrance interviews are not conducted in government schools; in fact, the respondent adds that learners who gain access to P1 in government schools do not even know how to hold a pencil (see turn 17) as learners join government schools (in P1) at the age of five or six, not having had any formal education.

¹⁵T: Kati n’otwala omwana ka ngeze nti nno omututte mu private schools nga zino ezitandika kati ng’e Kasaka wali, oyo omwana owa P1 bamuwa interview ne balaba nti eeh, oyo asobola okubeera mu P1. Naye kati ono owa P.1 tamanyi nti ‘a’ ebeera bw’eti tamanyi nti ekkalaamu bagikwata bwe bati.

So when you take a child say to a starting private school for instance there is one in Kasaka, the child of P1 is given an interview to determine whether they are fit for P1. But this one here in P1 does not know how ‘a’ looks like, s/he does not know how to hold a pencil.

¹⁶MS: Mhm. Nange nnali sikifumiitirizangako.

Yes, I had never thought about it.

¹⁷T: Aaa, nze nakirowoozaako dda, n’owulira oli ng’akugamba nti omwana wa P1 wali egindi, asobola okukola bw’ati, naye ono owammwe tasobola. N’ogamba kaakati ono oba kiki ky’ayogedde!

Oh, yes, for me I thought about it already. You may hear someone telling you that a P1 child in school x is able to do this and that but this one here is not able to do that. So you wonder what that person is talking about.

As stated above, there is no formal policy in Uganda to guide those private individuals who open up pre-primary schools, and learning in these schools is therefore conducted in English

because this is what parents prefer and teachers regard as appropriate for L2 (English) acquisition. In fact, the main reason why parents send their children to private preschools is because they want their children to learn English as fast as possible. Gardner (2012: 251) explains that, globally, the beliefs that 'younger is better' and 'more is better' (amongst other factors) has 'led to an unprecedented increase in young learners of and in English in mainstream school systems, alongside a flourishing industry of private kindergartens'. In Uganda, this state of affairs has created some competition between private and government schools: Parents of children who attend government schools have a desire for their children to speak English like those who attend private schools do. When parents realise that this is not possible (at least not in the early grades), for reasons already discussed, they prefer to move their children from public schools to private schools. Respondents in this study, however, mentioned that when parents transfer their children from government to private schools, the children are demoted two classes. The justification for this demotion is that it compensates for the two to three (English-medium) preschool years that these learners (those who initially joined government schools) have missed.

Insights from the classroom observations

As stated above, it appeared a great concern for government school teachers that their learners did not attend pre-primary. Private schools (school C and D) each had pre-primary sections which children joined at age 3 or 4. During the time some children join pre-primary in private schools, those who will attend government schools are seated at home waiting to attain age 6, the official age of joining P1. In the classroom observations conducted in government schools (A and B), teachers were heard criticising learners about what they did in class and also teaching them how to shape letters in P1 and P2. Such challenges and/or tasks were not a problem in private schools because learners had already learnt letter shapes in pre-primary for 2 or 3 years. In other words, teachers in government schools struggled to teach and give learners what they should have had in pre-primary (see previous interview extract) as well as starting them off with the primary prescribed content in P1. For example, see the following classroom extracts from school A and B compared with one taken from school D which demonstrate the challenges both teachers and pupils encounter as a result of absence of preschool.

The following two extracts were taken from a Luganda reading lesson in P1 in a rural government school A. In these extracts, teacher turns are marked with T and learner(s) or pupil(s) turns are marked with L(s).

Extract 2

- T: Wandika eyiyo ndabe. Kwata bw'oti. 'k' bw'oti bw'ogiwandiika bulijjo? Si ye eyo giddemu ndabe. Waggulu gy'onyoola, n'owetamu bw'oti. Yanguya. Tunula ggwe eno olabe bwe tuwandiika. Sirika!
Write yours so that I see it. Hold like this. Is this the way you have been writing 'k'? It is not the one, rewrite it so that I see it. It is the upper side that you curve then you turn like this. Be quick. You look here so that you can see how we write. Keep quiet!

Extract 3

- T: Kati buli omu ampandiikire 't' awo ku table. Giwandiike n'engalo ne bw'otateekako kkalaamu. Wandika ndabe. Ggwe wandika nze engalo bw'eba

etambula mba ngiraba. Wandiiika n'engalo yo nga toline kkalaamu. Ggwe yanguya. Toggyaayo kkalaamu, wandiiika buwandiisi bw'oti, ndabe nga ye 't' yennyini. Naawe eno nga bw'owandiika mwenna mbalaba lumu. Naawe Shanita wandiiika. Yanguya eyiyo. Ate ggwe? Wandiiika eri. Kati wandiiika 'e'. *Every one write for me 't' on your table. Write it with your finger; you may not use a pencil. Write it so that I see it. You just write, when the finger is moving I can see it. Write with your finger without a pencil. Please hurry up, do not take out your pencil. Just write like this, so that I can see the real 't'. Can you also write? I can see you all at a go. Shanita, you may also write. Hurry up. What about you? Write the other side. Now write 'e'.*

The next two extracts (4 and 5) were taken from P1 English and Luganda lessons in a rural government school B respectively.

Extract 4

- T: Good. Ahaa, Patience, thank you very much. Patience has managed to write the word fish. Buli omu njagala to write that word fish there. Yes, write the word fish there. Mukitegedde bakulu? Yee n'ekigambo fish nkyagalirawo ddala nno ka mbabuulire. Okitaddewo? Ka tulabe atasobola kulaba kigambo fish. Dnjenda okuseka. Nnyabo nnyabo, Nnaalu, uh, uh. Laba, owandiika odda ludda wa naawe? We said when we are writing, we begin from the left to the right. Kaakati omu ndaba atandikira ku right adda ku left, mbigaanye. Eeh, wamma Kim ky'ekyo. Iii, Mutunzi oswadde bannange! Mutunzi kino ekigambo bakiwandiika bati? Mu kuwandiika bava ludda wa? Uh, nkigaanye. *Good. Yes, Patience, thank you very much. Patience has managed to write the word fish. Everyone I want you to write that word fish there. Yes, write the word fish there. Have you all understood that? Yes I also want the word fish. Have you written it there? Let's see he who cannot see the word fish. I am going to laugh at you. Oh, oh, Nnaalu, oh, in which direction are you heading with your writing? We said when we are writing, we begin from the left to the right. But I can see one writing from right to left, I don't want that. Yes, Kim you are doing the right thing. Iii, Mutunzi, shame upon you! Mutunzi, is this word written like this? From which hand do we begin while writing? Yes, I have refused that.*

Extract 5

- T: Si kwesigama bw'oti n'osimba olukono. Eeh? Otuula bulungi n'okwata ekkalaamu. Guliwa omukono ogukwata ekkalaamu, gundage. Ahaa, kaakati tugenda kuwandiika buli omu erinnya lye. Tuva ku mukono ki era tudda ku mukono ki? Musooke munzijukizeeko, tuva wa? *Do not lean back and stretching your arm on the desk. Yes? You sit properly and hold your pencil. Which hand holds the pencil, show it to me. Yes, we are now going to write, each one their names. From which hand do we start and to which hand do we head? Please remind me, where do we start?*
- Ls: Tuva ku kkono.
We start from left.

The next extract (6) was taken from a private school C in an English lesson (in P1) where the teacher introduced children to new words.

Extract 6

- T: Why are you seated five? Who does not sit here? You go where you sit. I think you have finished. Good handwriting. Who has a short pencil? Uhm? Julius, wandiika bulungi. Has everybody finished number one?
Why are seated five? Who does not sit here? You go where you sit. I think you have finished. Good handwriting. Who has a short pencil? Yes? Julius, write properly. Has everybody finished number one?

As seen in extracts, 2 to 6, teachers in rural government and private schools face varied challenges in teaching P1/P2 due to the presence and/or absence of a pre-primary section in the two sets of schools. Teachers in P1 and P2 in private schools (C and D) as seen in extract 6 were not bothered about letter shapes or about which side of the book to begin writing; they were instead bothered about good handwriting. On the other hand, and as mentioned earlier, teachers in government schools in the P1/P2 classes are just introducing children to the initial stages of learning to write, e.g., which side of the book to start writing and how letters are shaped. While this is happening in rural government schools, the learners in private schools who have had preschooling are concentrating on learning P1/P2 curriculum content, something that clearly shows that the two sets of learners are not at the same level of learning and that they do not experience the same opportunities of learning.

CONCLUSION

The ethnographic survey has indicated that many private schools in Uganda have shunned MT education in favour of English-only education from P1. This means that even preschool children (as young as three years) are taught through the medium of English as soon as they join this level of education. Recall that the Ugandan language-in-education policy states that urban schools are allowed to teach through the medium of English from P1 onwards (as there are purportedly too many logistical problems to selecting one indigenous language as LoLT), whereas schools in rural areas are meant to choose a dominant language in their community as LoLT. Given that English is the LoLT in preschools throughout, rural schools are then required to switch from English as LoLT in preschool to MT as LoLT in P1 and back to English in P4. The unofficial English-only language policy in preschools thus makes MT education somewhat disjointed.

Fillmore (1991: 325) asks a series of pertinent questions (paraphrased here): What justification can be offered for L1 loss? What do young children do when they discover that the only language that is spoken at their school is one that they do not know? How do these children respond when they realise that the only language they know has no function or value in that new social world and that, in fact, it constitutes a barrier to their participation in the social life of the school? Although the effects on Ugandan children of the practice of very early introduction to English have not yet been studied, elsewhere there is evidence that when a young child's MT development is interrupted by introducing a new language in an academic environment, it affects their cognitive-academic development (see Benson, 2008; Cummins, 1992, 2000a, 2000b, 2005; Fafunwa, Macauley, & Sokoya, 1989). Given the possible negative psychological and cognitive-academic effects that disrupted L1 acquisition

can have, an unpopular question to ask in the face of strongly expressed parental and teacher preference for the introduction of English as early as possible would be whether it might not be more sensible to delay the teaching and learning of English until children are ready to enter primary school.

Since pre-primary schooling is not compulsory in Uganda, a number of parents enrol their children straight into P1 (in government schools), for financial and logistical reasons. A strong ECD policy could see all children in Uganda enjoy the same learning opportunities, including the same language learning opportunities. I argue that the absence of a language policy stating that all preschools need to instruct their learners in their MTs is undermining the MT education programme specified in the current language-in-education policy and therefore constrains proper acquisition of reading and writing skills. In order to minimise the difficulties encountered in language-policy implementation in P1 resulting from the use of English during pre-primary schooling, the government of Uganda should expand its current language-in-education policy to include this level of education. This should lead to prolonged exposure to MT for all preschool Ugandan children and allow these children to first develop their MT before they are exposed to English as L2 and as LoLT. In such a manner, additive instead of subtractive bilingualism will be promoted. It would also be most beneficial if pre-schooling can be made compulsory for all Ugandan children so as to minimise the challenges of beginning to read and write for the first time as was the case in rural government schools, A and B.

END NOTES

In this article, *pre-primary*, *preschool* and *Early Childhood Development* or *ECD* refer to the period before entering the first formal school grade (primary 1, or P1 in the case of Uganda) and not only to the year immediately preceding this first grade. Pre-primary in Uganda lasts for between two to three years. There are three classes that learners go through at this level: Baby class, Middle class and Top class. There are, however, other pre-school centres with a different nomenclature, e.g., Baby class, Kindergarten I and Kindergarten II; or Class I, Class II and Class III. Some children attend pre-primary for two or three years depending on the age of entry or how fast they pick-up what is taught.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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