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English-only language-in-education policy in multilingual classrooms in Ghana

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This paper, based on the findings of a qualitative study, discusses the influence of Ghana’s recently introduced English-only language-in-education policy on pupils’ classroom communicative practices and learning generally. It highlights how the use of English – an unfamiliar language – creates anxiety among students and stalls effective classroom participation. The paper first considers the key issues that impinge on the literacy development in multilingual classrooms in postcolonial Africa including the uninformed attitudes towards mother tongue/bilingual education. It then draws on the empirical data from Africa and elsewhere to refute the negative perceptions about mother-tongue education, and examines the prospects for bilingual/mother-tongue education in multilingual classrooms in Ghana.

Keywords: Ghana; language-in-education policy; bilingualism; mother tongue literacy; affective factors

Introduction

Most studies on the quality of primary education in the developing countries tend to highlight pedagogic issues; teacher quality; the lack of teaching, learning materials, and other resources; and poor infrastructure, with little attention given to the issue of medium of instruction (Martin, 1999). Without a doubt, the children’s poor performance could be attributed to a wide range of factors including inadequate parental support, low motivation of teachers, large class sizes, poor teacher quality, obsolete teaching methods, etc. For instance, Lipson and Wixson (2004) and Owen et al. (2005) refer to a number of studies on literacy instruction in Ghana which identified the methods teachers use in the classrooms as a major contributor to the pupils’ poor performance. Kraft (2003) notes that the sameotelelearning as well as the whole-class and teacher-dominated methods observed in Ghanaian classrooms three decades ago are still prevalent today.

However, as Martin (1999, p. 38) indicates ‘little is known about the interactional patterns in the classroom in multilingual contexts’ and suggests the need for more field data on language matters in multilingual classroom settings as the medium of instruction plays a seminal role in school learning. This study then examines the influence of Ghana’s recent English-only policy on education and specifically literacy learning by reporting on pupils’ classroom communicative practices.

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Background and context
Ghanaisamultilingualsocietywithabout44indigenouslanguagesandanumberofcross-borderlanguages (Hall, 1983). Nine of the 44 languages have, since independence in 1957, been officially approved by the state for use in education and in the media: Akan (init three varieties of Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi, and Fante), Dagare-Wali, Dagbani, Dangme, Ewe, Ga, Gonja, Kasem, and Nzema. These languages were chosen because they have larger populations and a strategic distribution (Hall, 1983). The nine approved local languages are, however, not the media of instruction; their status in education has varied according to the policy on the use of mother tongue in education of successive governments since independence.

From 1971 up until 2002, the language-in-education policy in Ghana was generally that the main Ghanaian languages provided for in the curricula of basic schools should be used as the medium of instruction in the first three years of the primary course and, where possible, in the next three years as well. In any upper primary or higher classes where English is the teaching medium, the appropriate Ghanaian language(s) will be properly taught as a school subject (Ministry of Education, 2002). The main weakness of the policy was that very little had been done to ensure its full implementation. Kraft (2003, p. 3) laments that ‘the vast majority of Ghanaian children did not master either English or their mother tongue under the old P1-P3 in the mother tongue, transferring to English for P4 and the rest of their schooling’. However, in 2002, the government announced that instruction at all levels would be in English for pupils in all basic schools (both public and private) who would simply be required to study a Ghanaian language as a subject from the first year of primary school (primary 1) to junior secondary school (JSS) level three (year 9). Where there were no teachers, French would be taught from JSS 1 to JSS 3.

The government also alluded to the fact that English has become a global language and that Ghana is part of that global village. The early introduction of the language to children in primary schools, as was suggested, would help them to learn the language effectively and to take part in global commerce, industry, and technology (Government of Ghana, 2002).

The policy further argues that children easily learn to express their ideas in any language they are exposed to. The earlier they are exposed to English, the better they will acquire the desired level of competence. Interestingly, the official position is also that private schools in Ghana achieve relatively good results because of the continued use of the English language as a medium of instruction right from preschool level to all other levels. Other reasons, such as the lack of local language teachers and materials, and the fact that textbooks are developed in English, were also offered to support the official policy. Until these issues are resolved, it is considered preferable to use English as the only medium of instruction (Government of Ghana, 2002).

Negative perceptions
The official views of the government are supported by certain local and global perceptions about mother-tongue education. Studies point to a widespread and persistent belief in both
rural and urban African communities that English (French, etc.) alone is the essential language for empowerment and advancement (Andoh-Kumi, 1998; Brock-Utne, 2001; Bunyi, 2005; Dzinyela, 2001; Kraft, 2003; Muthwii, 2004). Andoh-Kumi (2001, pp. 5–6) reports that a large majority of rural Ghanaian parents prefer the use of English as the medium of instruction because, according to them, ‘the purpose of schooling is to learn English and English is international and can take our children to places’. The parents also hold that anybody who finishes school and is unable to speak English is ‘useless’. In a related study, Dzinyela (2001, p. 6) noted of Ghanaian parents and teachers that:

Despite pupils’ and teachers’ awareness that pupils understand better when teachers use local language for instruction, most pupils continue to hear the strong message from teachers and parents that English is preferable, because it is the language of high status that symbolises upward mobility.

Brock-Utne (2001) suggests the preference for English (and other dominant languages) could be attributed to the fact that some people distrust the motives of those who advance the arguments in favour of the mother tongue, particularly when such advocacy comes from outside experts; they believe they have a hidden agenda to debase education in Africa. In recent stories in the Ghanaian media (Ghana News Agency, 2005; 2006), two influential individuals—a municipal director of education and a traditional leader—warned about the dangers of using local languages as media of instruction and suggested, among other things, that it could lead to the creation of class distinction between public and private school children as private schools implement an English-only policy from kindergarten.

Another factor in the dominance of foreign languages as medium of instruction is that educational policy decisions and implementation remain highly centralised and reflect the will of the ruling/postcolonial elites (Woolman, 2001; Wolff, 2005, pp. 46–47) who, together with some of their expatriate advisors and experts from donor countries and agencies, continue to perceive:

African languages as primitive idioms with limited communicative value, only to be spoken by illiterate hunters, gatherers, farmers, or cattle herders, and for culturally highly restricted matters only... African languages are innowayapttobeusedforanyadvancedwrittencommunicationpertaining to political, economic, cultural, and social matters of our times, in particular not for anything to do with modern technology, science, and political philosophy.

Wolff (2005) further argues that the dominant ex-colonial languages have economic and social currency that they are powerful mechanisms for social stratification and social mobility, and that African political elites and educators find it difficult to challenge this perception. English offers an elite status that local peoples buy into: speaking English is associated with high prestige and, given the multiplicity of local languages, educators and policy-makers find an easy way out by insisting on English as both the medium of instruction and the official language of government and business.

Barrett (1994, p. 13) thus notes that:

...the retention of English as a medium (in Tanzania and in many postcolonial African countries) benefits the elite because their children are generally speaking, those who will be better able to manage with it... English thus functions as a gate-keeping device essential to the maintenance of the position of the ruling elite.
Mazrui (2004), on the other hand, is convinced that the lack of linguistic nationalism in Africa also contributes to the low value and attention assigned to African languages. Linguistic nationalism is when states accord a high premium to their own languages, protect and encourage their use over other languages; it tends to be higher in India and elsewhere in Asia than in Africa.

Mother-tongue education/bilingualism and cognition
These perceptions, no doubt, both informed and were informed by the government’s decision to opt for a national language-in-education policy which favoured the use of English language from primary 1. Current theory and research in mother-tongue/bilingual education, however, tend to suggest that students’ poor academic achievement can be related to the exclusion or the limited use of instruction in the home language in many school programmes (Au, 1998; Cummins, 1996; Krashen, 1985; Williams & Snipper, 1990), or to the low status accorded the home language. Research evidence for language-related considerations regarding literacy/learning suggests that beginning literacy learning in L1 provides a strong foundation for reading and writing in L2 (Au, 1998; Baker, 1996; Cummins, 1986; Cummins, 1996; Cummins, 2000; Edwards, 1997).

According to Kraft (2003, p. 3):

Second language acquisition research is very clear. Children who go through a lengthy hyperperiod with their first language as the mode of instruction and complete much of their normal academic and cognitive development in that language will have much greater facility when learning the foreign language... You cannot transfer nothing to something. It has never been done...

Kraft’s (2003) view has been supported by various research and evaluation studies of mother-tongue/bilingual education programmes from around the world, including Australia (Ricciardelli, 1992) and India (Mohanty, 1994). Some Ghanaian and African studies also confirm the positive benefits that accrue to a bilingual learner when both her languages are developed and used.

In an experimental study in Ghana, Andoh-Kumi (1998) compared the academic performance in English-only classes with classes where a local language, Fante, was the sole medium of instruction. This study noted that pupils took active part in lessons taught in the local Fante language and felt more confident to contribute than they did in lessons taught in English. Another interesting finding was that pupils performed better in Mathematics and General Science when taught in Fante than in English. Andoh-Kumi (1998, pp. 135–136) comments:

For several years many educated Ghanaians have held the view that subject such as mathematics and science cannot be taught in the Ghanaian language. The results demonstrate that not only can math be taught in Ghanaian languages, but also pupils can even achieve better results with it than with the use of English as the medium. These differences, however, light they maybe, are interesting and impressive, considering the fact that in ourschools the Ghanaian language, if it is taught at all, has not been taught as well as the English is taught. We also know that our lessons in teaching methods and strategies have always been done in English.

Wilmot’s (2003) study of an urban classroom in Ghana also portrays the benefits of learning in a familiar language. It shows that a student assessed by his teacher as ‘fairly average performer’ got answers to the mathematical problems right but was unable to explain how he arrived at them in English, the medium of classroom communication.
However, when the language of instructions shifted to the student’s mother tongue, Ewe, he was able to offer clear explanations and demonstrate a competency in abstract thinking which had not been evident when he was forced to answer in English. Wilmot (2003) notes that the so-called fairly average performer was equally competent in mathematics and could solve mathematical problems at the same level of difficulty as above-average students. What indeed made the difference was the language of learning. By changing the medium of instruction from the dominant classroom language to the child’s mother tongue, what was ‘invisible’ to the teacher – the student’s true knowledge of mathematics – was made visible (Wilmot, 2003).

Hovens (2002) also, in an experimental study, compared bilingual and monolingual education programmes in Guinea-Bissau and Niger, West Africa, and observed that pupils who started in their mother tongues could read and write better even in the second language. The study also noted that classrooms where the local language was used were more stimulating, interactive, and relaxed.

Brock-Utne and Alidou (2005) report of a study which observed the same teacher teaching a topic in biology to two different classes in a secondary school in Tanzania, in which she used English in one class and Kiswahili in another. They indicate that the students in the class where English was used as medium of instruction were silent, grave, looked afraid, and tried to guess the answers the teacher wanted. Brock-Utne and Alidou (2005, p. 131), in contrast, described the lesson which was in the local language as:

...an interactive lesson, a lesson of give and take between the teacher and students and between students, not only a lesson where the teacher pours bits of knowledge into student heads. It helped them build self-confidence and a belief in themselves and their learning potential.

The above review based on a number of theoretical and practical perspectives makes it imperative to explore the extent to which the medium of instruction influences pupils’ participation in classroom activities, particularly in multilingual/multiethnic classroom settings where an unfamiliar foreign language is used as medium of instruction.

Methodology
The study, an ethnographic case study involving classroom observations of teacher and pupils interactions, interviews and focus-group discussions with pupils mainly, was carried out in a primary 4 classroom at Tomso basic public schools in Kumasi, Ghana. Tomso primary/junior secondary-school cluster is one of the two schools serving several suburbs within a radius of about five kilometres. Tomso is mainly composed of an Akan-speaking Asante-Twi community. However, the surrounding suburbs are settler communities populated by other tribes in Ghana and from the neighbouring countries such as Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Togo. For instance, the Bloqua community is largely composed of Ewe and Gakrom is a Ga community and therefore the school has a multietnic/multilingual population with more than a dozen local and cross-border languages spoken. Tomso school was purposively selected for this research as its multietnic/multilingual student population fitted well with the study’s objective, which was to ascertain how the English-only policy is embedded in their interaction in the multilingual classroom.

The primary 4 class was used as a case and the main data collection point for a number of reasons. The 2006 primary 4 year group were the pupils who were in primary 1 when the English-only policy was introduced in 2002 and therefore was deemed the appropriate class
for observing the interactions between teachers, pupils, and texts during English lessons. 
primary 4 is a transitional class where the pupils are introduced to additional subjects 
includingscienceanditwasusefultofindouttheextenttowhichthepupilshaveacquired 
the basic skills in English required to follow lessons in all content subjects.

Amakpor4 (who is 17 years old and the oldest in the class) was selected as a case as 
his socioeconomic conditions reflect the settings in which literacy and learning generally 
begin for majority of the pupils at Tomso and their conditions obviously have important 
consequences for school literacy learning (Neuman, 1999; Neuman & Celano, 2001). 
Amakpor lives with his parents and two other siblings in a compound house with an 
courtyard opening, leading to rooms either directly or through a veranda or porch. About 
seven households – a total of perhaps 50 people – live here. He and his family share two 
rooms, a living room and a bedroom. The house lacks basic facilities such as electricity, 
portable water, and a toilet.

Amakpor does not attend school regularly for which he blames his father who ‘is 
more interested in me helping him in his carpentry shop ... my mother is interested in 
my schooling but she is not in the position to help. She does not work and depends 
solely on my father’.

Amakpor has repeated almost every class at least once from primary 1 to primary 4 in his present class and has been in and out of school on a number of 
occasions. However, Amakpor is determined to complete at least the basic nine years 
of education. But would he and children of his kind get the excellent education that all 
children are entitled to?

A compressed ethnographic fieldwork (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004) was used for the fieldwork. This involved the observation of lessons almost every school day over a 13-week 
fieldwork period (May–August 2006) as well as devoting adequate time to each of the 
other data-gathering activities: interviews and focus-group discussions. One-on-one in-depth 
interviews lasting up to 60 minutes were held with five pupils, and two focus-
group discussions each made up of 20 students were held.

Data analysis was cyclical and ongoing and took place immediately after classroom 
observations, which focused on both macro- and micro-ethnographic settings of the classroom–teacher–pupils–text interactions. On the other hand, the field notes, interviews, 
and focus-group discussions data were transcribed and read a number of times, first, 
within each data set and then across data to draw connections, link points of agreements 
and also note differences in participants’ responses. Through numerous readings, I generated a list of coding statements, themes, and selected relevant quotations for the final write-up.

The findings of the study are reported in the following sections. In the first four sections, 
I illustrate the challenges pupils face in communicating in the English language, the official 
medium of instruction, in typical classroom situations which I observed during my fieldwork. These are followed with a discussion of the potential influence of the English-only 
policy on learning. I further discuss the issue of language anxiety and self-esteem – the two factors which the pupils consistently alluded to as conditions stalling their participation 
in classroom communication.

A stranger comes to school
The reality of the lamentations of Andoh-Kumi (1998), Brock-Utne (2001), Dzinyela 
(2001), Kraft (2003), and others discussed earlier, was revealed to me on my first 
Monday at Tomso Primary School when I observed an English lesson in a primary 4 
class. Ms Akua had decided to use the morning’s English language period to go
through review exercises in the pupils' English textbook 4, as a follow-up lesson to a previous one:

Teacher: This morning we learnt some words, what was the first word?
Pupils: Mine
Teacher: Yes, mine. Who can form a sentence with mine?
Pupil 1: This house is mine
Pupil 2: The pen is mine
Pupil 3: The newspaper is mine
Pupil 4: The ruler is mine
Teacher: What was the second word?
Pupils: Yours
Teacher: Yes, yours. Without the 's' you say your. Who can form a sentence with yours?
Pupil: The pen is yours
Teacher: The third word was what?

Amakpor arrived 10 minutes into the English language lesson and the class teacher immediately turned her attention to him: 'Are you now coming to school?' Amakpor stood speechless staring at the teacher. The teacher continued: 'Can't you talk? I'm asking you why you are late.' Amakpor remained silent. The teacher ignored him for a while but eventually told him: 'Go and sit down! You're a truant! You're not serious!' She then turned to the class to continue the lesson.

Amakpor had barely settled down when the teacher decided to involve him in the lesson. She called him to the board to point to 'hers' from a list of about seven words, including theirs, mine, his, and ours. Amakpor looked at the board but could not point to 'hers'. The teacher then called another pupil to show him the word and asked him to spell 'hers'. Amakpor still could not spell the word. Determined to persist, she brought some flashcards, asked Amakpor to look through and pick his to show to the class and then spell out. Amakpor was completely lost, a real stranger surrounded by an unfamiliar language:

Teacher: These simple words you don't know them and you don't know how to spell. [TEACHER REPRENDS AMAKPOR IN TWI]. Dabiara wote Kapinta mu, womp1 sukuu ba. 'You don't like school, you're always in the carpentry shop.

(Transcriptions conventions are provided at the end of the paper).

But Amakpor was not the only 'stranger in the class'. When the teacher decided to turn her attention to Steve and Mike, it became evident that many more pupils in the class were mere spectators watching the teacher and a few 'good' pupils perform:

Teacher: Form sentences with the word hers. Yes Steve
Steve: (fumbles). This is hers book
Teacher: No
Teacher: Hers, yes Mike
Mike: The ruler has hers.
Teacher: You are just saying something for saying sake. I saw you playing, that is why I called you. Keep standing.... Let’s move on to number five, OURS.

Later on that Monday, during break time, I interviewed Amakpor, an Ewe speaker who also speaks Twi, the local language of the area fluently, in Twi and asked him:

Question: Ad1n nti na w’amma nt1m? ,Why were you late?.
Amakpor: Na meregye sika ụ me papa h ab1tua ‘printing fees’, osee onibi. Menim s1 meba a, tikya b1pam me. ,My father delayed me. I was waiting to collect money from him to pay off my ‘examination printing’ fee but he said he hadnomoney.IthoughtI wouldbedrivenoutfromclass.

Question: Why didn’t you tell teacher what you had just told me?
Amakpor: [HEWASFRANKWITHME], Merentumikanoborofo, ‘Madam’b1kas1 menkanobor fo. ,Icoulnd’tsayitin English. Madam would insist that I say it in English..
[FEMALE TEACHERS ARE ADDRESSED MADAM, AND MALE TEACHERS SIR – A COLONIAL INHERITANCE]

The school insists that pupils speak English at all times and it is one of the ten-point classroom norms pasted in each classroom which states: Speak English both inside and out side the classroom (emphasis added).

The case of the three primary 6 girls
The challenge of using English-only was also evident when I chanced on three primary 6 girls; Abi, Grace, and Ekua, doing shared/guided reading. As indicated elsewhere in this paper, at primary 6, it was expected that the pupils had acquired the basic skills in English language required to follow lessons in all content subjects yet Abi and Grace showed extreme difficulty in the use of the official language of instruction.

Ekua, the brightest and leader of the group, and the only one who could read at the appropriate age level, was guiding the two others to read a passage from the primary 6 English textbook. After reading a couple of sentences, Ekua decided to do a drill with the two girls. She asked Abi to point to the word ‘across’ in the passage and spell out. Abi persistently pointed to the word ‘Important’. Later in an interview with her, she confessed that she could not match the sounds of the alphabet to the letters. Grace, on the otherhand,couldidentifyandspellafewwordsbutcouldnotreadoutacomplesesentence, neither could she understand and explain the story in her own words either in English or in Twi.

Vociferous teacher, silent pupils
Another consequence of the English-only policy was that much of the classroom talk was a teacher-based (Bunyi, 2005; Martin, 1999) as many of pupils are unable to communicate fluently in English, the medium of instruction. Pupils’ responses were largely praises as they clapped for their classmates who answered correctly and choruses – ‘Yes
Madam’ – to endorse the teacher’s initiations. In our case-study classroom, only seven of the 74 pupils are formally classified as very good; these are pupils who, according to the class teacher, ‘are able to read fluently and without the teacher’s intervention’. Most class interactions revolve around them; at the other extreme are pupils such as Amakpor ‘the stranger’, Bella, Mike, Musa and others who are classified as weak. Only occasionally are they called to participate in class activities. The teacher spends little time with them, especially when they fail to give instant and ‘correct’ answers and often makes comments such as: ‘You can’t waste our time’, and moves on to more ‘competent’ pupil.

The ‘remove and replace’ sentence formation pattern
An interesting feature of the class interaction observed was that the pupils’ responses followed the same pattern of substituting one word for another in the preceding sentence apparently resulting from their limited vocabulary and command on the language of classroom communication. As we see from the following extract:

Teacher: If you want to go out or if you’ve done something wrong to a person what will you say to the person? For example if I want to go outside what I’ll say is: ‘Please madam or please sir, may I go out?’ The first thing I’ll say is what? Please. If you’re in need of something from somebody you’ll say please too... And if you want to tell somebody something, let’s say they’re two and you want to say something to one of them, you’ll say, ‘Excuse me’ to the one you don’t want to speak to. You’ll say, ‘Excuse me’ and then you’ll talk to the other one. Do you understand me?

Pupils: Yes madam

Teacher: So today we’re talking about please, excuse me and sorry. We want to use these three words in sentences. ‘Excuse me please, can I take your book? Do you understand me?’

Pupils: Yes madam

Teacher: Who can use ‘Excuse me’ to form a sentence. Yes, yes....

Pupil 1: Excuse me, can I take your pencil?

Teacher: Excuse me, can I take your pencil? Very good

Pupil 2: Excuse me, can I take your pen?

Teacher: Excuse me, can I take your pen?

Pupil 3: Excuse me, can I take your book?

Teacher: Yes, excuse me can I take your book?

Serm: Excuse me, can I help you?

Teacher: (Teacher endorses this contribution and repeats it aloud), ‘Excuse me can I help you?’ Clap for Serm (class claps)

Pupil 1 starts off with ‘Excuse me can I take your pencil?’ Pupil 2 repeats the same sentence but replaces pencil with pen: ‘Excuse me can I take your pen?’ And the third pupil uses book in place of pen: ‘Excuse me can I take your book?’ This pattern of ‘remove and replace’ word ‘tendsto the main feature of the pupils’ responses. However, occasionally some pupils deviate from the pattern and come up with their own independent responses. Such novel responses usually receive praise from the teacher who then asks the class to clap for a pupil, as we see with the response of Serm in the extract above.
This kind of student response, which was the predominant feature in the lessons I observed, is an aspect of what Chick (1996) in his seminal work in South African classrooms, described as safe talk. Heller and Martin-Jones (2001, p. 13), similar to Chick (1996), refer to safe talk as:

Classroom talk that allows participation without any risk of loss of face fortheteacher and the learners and maintains an appearance of 'doing the lesson', while in fact little learning is actually taking place. This particular style of interaction arises from teachers' attempts to cope with the problem of using a former colonial language, which is remote from the learners' experiences out of school, asthemain medium of instruction.

Indeed, it can be argued that participants in our case study school are colluding in an elaborate pretence: the teachers pretend to be teaching and the pupils pretend to be learning. In reality, however, no effective teaching and no serious learning take place in the 'remove and replace' pattern of answering questions illustrated above. There were several instances where the pupils clearly did not understand the lesson. Yet when the teacher asked: 'Is that clear?' or 'Do you understand?' the children respond in chorus: 'Yes Madam'. For the entire period of this study, no pupil asked a question or initiated talk during the whole class interactions. Although the teacher recognises that the pupils had different abilities, she uses the same methods in teaching all the children at all times.

Discussion

The findings of the study as illustrated above provide some insights into the challenges posed by the use of unfamiliar language as a medium of learning in multiethnic, diverse school settings in Africa and elsewhere. Inexpatriate teachers' experiences. This section therefore draws on the interviews and the focus-group discussions to highlight the potential influence of the English-only policy on learning. I further discuss the issue of language anxiety which the pupils consistently alluded to as a reason for not participating in classroom communication.

The multiethnic community in which the children attending Tomso Primary School offers opportunities and cultural resources which are valuable assets for language learning and learning in general (Amanti, 2005) but which are often totally ignored in formal literacy learning. Like most pupils at Tomsom primary school, Amakpor is multilingual; in addition to Ewe, his mother tongue, he also speaks Twi, the local language of the area, and Ga fluently. Amakpor has had no formal instruction in learning these languages. He acquired them by attending to more competent speakers and through his interaction with peers and playmates at home and also within the community (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, through his exposure to and participation in language-mediated interactions, Amakpor has been socialised to use these languages as his joint L1s (Ochs, 1986).

This process of language socialisation (Schieffelin, 1990; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), however, takes place in a non-threatening environment and the non-expert interlocutor is accommodated, assisted, and encouraged in a variety of ways to learn the classroom language. Translation, code mixing and switching, and repetition of words, expressions, and sentences are common practices. Further, the process of learning is context-embedded and cognitively undemanding (Baker, 2001; Cummins, 1996, 2000) and the novices receive considerable support from knowledgeable members of the social group.

Language learning and communicative practices in the classroom contrast sharply with what obtains in the community. In spite of their proficiency in more than one local language,
many pupils at Tomso primary are classified as weak students mainly because they are unable to express their thoughts and ideas in English, the official language for teaching and learning. The discontinuity causes language shock (Allwright & Bailey, 2004), especially during the early years of formal schooling. Communication in the classroom is context-reduced and cognitively demanding (Cummins, 1996, 2000). Officially, little ornouseismadeoftheclassroomtransactions, answer questions, repeat or write what teacher says, or read aloud or copy notes from the blackboard in English.

Many pupils at Tomso believe that the use of English as the medium of instruction prevents them from actively participating in classroom activities (Allwright & Bailey, 2004), view that ‘when students’ language, culture, and experience are ignored or excluded in classroom interactions, students are immediately starting from a disadvantage’. This was confirmed by Amakpor:

\[
\text{Some of the thing the teacher asks me I understand or have an idea about, but I can't say it in English. I can say it in Twi or Ewe.}
\]

Another student whose first and second languages are Fante and Twi shares a similar view:

\[
\text{If I was good in English, I think teaching us with Twi would help improve our learning because with Twi we get to understand everything. With English there are certain things we don't understand.}
\]

Bella, who is Ewe, but speaks Twi and Hausa fluently, confesses that she is not good in English; she feels more confident with Twi than with English as the medium of classroom communication. Bellanever speaks in class and indicates that she goes blank when English is spoken.

As Brock-Utne (2001, pp. 120–121) notes:

\[
\text{Children who speak a language other than the language of instruction confront a substantial barrier to learning. In the crucial, early grades when children are trying to acquire basic literacy as well as adjust to the demands of the school setting, not speaking the language of instruction can make the difference between succeeding and failing in school, between remaining in school and dropping out.}
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From the classroom observations and discussions with the pupils, it also became evident that their inability to communicate in class largely related to their lack of self-confidence, a feeling of inadequacy and the generally low level of self-esteem. It would appear that the use of unfamiliar language gives rise to feelings of anxiety, singled out in the literature as possibly ‘the affective factor that most persuasively obstructs the learning process’ (Arnold & Brown, 1999, p. 8). Anxiety is associated with negative feelings such as self-doubt, uneasiness, frustration, apprehension, and tension (Arnold & Brown, 1999). More specifically, language anxiety has been defined by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986, p. 128) as, ‘a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process’.

Anxious students are generally apprehensive about oral classroom activities where they tend to have little or no command over the use of the unfamiliar classroom language. They see classroom communication practices as moving so fast that they have difficulty in catching up (Lai, 1994). Anxiety experienced in communication in the classroom therefore can
have a debilitating effect on the language-learning process and also school achievements (Oxford, 1999; Stroud & Wee, 2006; Woodrow, 2006).

Allwright and Bailey (2004, p. 173) suggest that the use of an unfamiliar language as instructional communication deprives learners their usual means of communication and hence the opportunity to behave normally: ‘It takes away something from their humanness and let them feel they are representing themselves badly, showing only some of their real personality and intelligence’.

In addition, Lai (1994), Andres (1999) and Allwright and Bailey (2004) mention self-confidence as a prerequisite to success in language learning. My data tend to support these points. In my earlier interview with Amakpor, he expressed concern about remarks his teachers sometimes make:

My teachers don’t encourage me, rather they make me feel that school isn’t the place for me. When teachers ask me questions and I can only answer them with ‘I don’t know’, they’ll give me a negative remark which completely puts me off from coming to school regularly.

Amakpor’s concern was corroborated by another student in a focus-group discussion:

When I make a contribution and make a mistake the class laughs at me… so I always feel shy and reluctant to take part in class discussions.

The teachers’ comments raise the issue of pupils’ self-esteem and confident building. Andres (1999) refers to self-esteem as an aspect of judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitude that the individual holds towards him/herself. Children’s self-esteem depends largely on their positive and negative experiences in their environment and on how their friends, teachers, parents and family perceive them, as well as how they see themselves. Children who receive positive comments and encouragement from their teachers, parents, and friends tend to be confident and have a sense of their own value. In our case, classroom, the pupils such as Amakpor, labelled as weak students, attract a great deal of negative comment and very little positive feedback and they thus tend to have a low self-esteem.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the challenges and prospects of developing literacies in bi/multilingual learners in schools in Africa with a special focus on Ghana. The role of affective factors – language anxiety and self-esteem – in classroom communicative practices in our case study school have also been highlighted. I have provided practical evidence to refute the so-called limitations of bilingualism and highlighted the benefits of mother-tongue/bilingual education. Learners’ access to the language of instruction is an important factor in literacy learning. The language of communication in the classroom is vital for the achievement of literacy and learning goals. Language mediates learning, allowing students to access new information and connect it to what they already know. It is also primarily through language that we are able to demonstrate what we have learned. The choice of language as the medium of education thus plays a critical role in the teaching-learning process.

There is abundant evidence to show that the effective use of familiar languages in African classrooms not only facilitates the development of literacy but also helps pupils learn more effectively other subjects, such as mathematics and science (Andoh-Kumi, 1998; Bamgbose, 1991; Brock-Utne, 2005; Brock-Utne & Alidou, 2005; Bunyi, 2005; Ejieh, 2004; Wilmot, 2003) and others cited in the literature-review section above.
The major challenge is therefore to change the attitudes and perceptions of key stakeholders in education in Ghana (and other African countries) and to develop new pedagogies for use with multilingual learners.

In a multilingual setting such as Ghana, a language policy that strengthens the local languages may invariably be costly. However, as Brock-Utne (2001, p. 118) points out:

When the costs are calculated, it should also be calculated what it costs to continue with a language policy where the language of instruction becomes a barrier to knowledge for millions of African children. Those concerned about democracy and good governance in Africa should also be concerned about the fact that in many countries information from the government to the people is given in a language that 90 percent of the people do not speak and hardly understand.

Transcription conventions

Plain text: English

Bold text: Twi

Italicics: Twi translations into English.

Notes

1. Similar to previous language policies, very little had been done to ensure its full implementation. Government failed to address the implementation challenges it alluded to. Current official position tends to be blurred. The good news though is that government is rolling out a USAID-sponsored bilingual education programme next academic year (2009/10). Bilingual reading materials in 11 local languages for use in kindergarten and primary 1 are being developed and a programme has been designed to train teachers on the use of the materials (Personal conversation with Carolyn Adger, USAID consultant to the Education Quality for All (EQUALL) programme, 29 January, 2009).


3. Throughout this report, I have used pseudonyms for the school, communities, teachers, and pupils involved for ethical reasons and also to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

4. The age of pupils in our case study ranges from nine to 17 years. The recommended age by Ghana Education Service (GES) for enrolment to primary 1 is six years. This means a child who progresses through primary school normally should be in primary 4 at age nine. However, only 20 pupils in the class of 74 were aged nine years. There are wide age range in classrooms. However, similar to the situations described by Fentiman, Halland Bundy (1999), many of the children in our case study cite poverty which compels them to frequently absent themselves from school to engage in economic activities to complement family incomes.

References


