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NOTES AND REPORTS

Instruction in the Mother Tongue: The Question of Logistics

Stephen Heyneman

Three factors must first be weighed before an investment is made in instructing students in the language spoken at home. One is the economic cost of materials, teacher training and the like; a second is the cognitive cost, if any, of using the mother tongue versus one of the other linguistic choices; the third is logistical feasibility. This paper discusses the latter. Drawing upon a representative sample of primary schools in an East African country it is discovered that only 22% of the classrooms are monolingual; 47% of the classrooms contain four or more languages. The average number/classroom is 3.8. The problems of intra-classroom linguistic heterogeneity must be overcome if mother tongue instruction, as policy, is to be realistic.

One recurring suggestion is that children beginning primary school should be taught in the language they speak at home. This makes intuitive sense. If they have to learn a new vocabulary and grammatical structure it would likely make the learning process all the more complex and less efficient. Furthermore, if the language of the school is different from the language of the home, so the argument goes, the "social distance" between the two might be exacerbated, and this could affect the propensity to remain in school.

Much has yet to be tested about this theory. We know pupils can learn slowly and leave school precipitously even if the language of instruction and the language of the home is the same; and we know the opposite is also true: that young people can learn quickly and remain in school even if the language of the school is different from the language of the home. Thus it is evident that the language of instruction is not the only determinant, either of learning or of participation.¹

As for facilitating literacy the evidence is mixed. Certainly adult literacy can more quickly be taught in the mother tongue; but in the case of adults the high opportunity cost prevents a meaningful choice. A mother with six children can hardly be expected to have time to learn a new language in order to become literate.

Primary schooling is a slightly different matter. In Ugandan primary schools for instance literacy is expected after 5-8 years of full-time exposure, a process which includes many cognitive skills in addition to literacy. One

¹ Evidence that mother tongue instruction is pedagogically effective (Travino, 1968; Giles, 1969) is contradicted by evidence that mother tongue instruction can prevent understanding of more complex reasoning problems (Macnamara, 1967; Saville and Troike, 1971; Bruck et al. forthcoming). What is evident is that mother tongue instruction can create disincentives to learn or to remain in school if the language of instruction differs from the language of the economy. For both sides see: Rohla (1978); Tiffen (1975); Epstein (N.A., 1977); and Engle (1975).

additional expectation is the hope that students will acquire a national or international language. Thus the expectations for mother tongue instruction in primary schools differ somewhat from its use among adults. For adults it is used as the sole medium of instruction. In primary schools it is used as a (temporary) vehicle in hopes of providing common communication skills between local and national levels, or between local and international levels.

Here I do not wish to enter into issues of pedagogical effectiveness or of cost.² At issue is the question of logistics, namely the number of languages which need to be available if each child is to learn in his/her mother tongue. We know that this question differs significantly between countries; that Bolivia may have three or four language groups and Nigeria 300. But to date information of this nature has been confined to the prevalence of language among the general population (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975a, b, c, d; 1976 a, b; Risen, 1975), not the school population. This is unsatisfactory for several reasons. First, it passes over the tendency of children from different language groups to have different rates of school attendance. Second, it misses the fact that children of different language groups have different propensities to attend school in a different place from their home. Areas of density in one language for the general population may not accurately reflect the linguistic make-up of those in school in the same area. The data we will peruse here attempt to cut across these problems by responding to a single question: were we to institute a policy of mother tongue instruction in classroom X or in Classroom Y, how many languages would we need to have at our disposal?

The data are derived from a random sample of primary schools in five districts and three urban areas in Uganda.³ They are representative of approximately 25% of the schools in the country. Though not a national sample, the data accurately reflect the linguistic make-up of the school population of a sufficient proportion of schools to suggest that the basic linguistic trends may be applicable beyond the survey's catchment areas. To generalize to the country at large, the names of the language groups would differ, but it is unlikely the variety of languages to be found in each classroom would differ.

Taken together, children in the Uganda primary school survey area represent 31 mother tongues, each a language as unintelligible to the other as French is from Spanish. This of course is not surprising; for one would expect this dispersion knowing the linguistic make-up of the general population. Of interest to us is how these languages are distributed among schools. This is displayed in Table 1.

² For these issues see: Fofunwa (1975) and Smith (1977).

³ See: S. Heyneman "Influences on Academic Achievement in Uganda: A 'Coleman Report' From a Non-Industrialized Society," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, June, 1975

Table 1
Distribution of Native Languages in
Ugandan Primary Schools
(Numbers in %)

| District | School Name | Acholi | Akur | Luganda | Lugisu | Lugwere | Lutiga | Lutunjo | Lusyaakole | Lusyaaranda | Lusyaole | Lusyaoro |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------|------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|------------|-------------|----------|----------|
| <u>Tooro</u> | Naibale | 42 | 4 | | | | | | | | | |
| | Kacungiro | 14 | | | | | | 57 | 14 | | | |
| | Katoosa | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Kyarusozi | 46 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Kyanjojo | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Mukola | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Eubosa | | | | | | | 4 | | | | |
| | Virika St. Peter & Pauls | | | 6 | | | | | | | | 4 |
| | St. John's Yorya | | | 3 | 4 | | | 2 | | 4 | | |
| | Dugombwa | | | | | 6 | | 6 | 3 | | | |
| | Karambi | 4 | | | | | | 93 | | | | 2 |
| | Kaanga | | | | | | | 93 | 7 | | | |
| | Kitalakibi Buera | 6 | | 1 | | | | 83 | 1 | | | |
| | Simbya | | | 5 | | 10 | | 24 | | | | |
| | Kisaabya | 49 | | | | | | | | 3 | | |
| <u>Jinja Municipal</u> | Walukuba Estate | | | 13 | 28 | 3 | | | | | | |
| <u>Mbale/Tororo</u> | Gangam St. Joseph's | | | 21 | 49 | 31 | | | | | 8 | |
| | Nabuyonga | 5 | 8 | 13 | 27 | 12 | 2 | | | | 12 | |
| | Maluku | 6 | 11 | 6 | 58 | | | | | | | |
| <u>Kampala/Entebbe</u> | Lusaka City | | | 84 | 3 | | | | | | | |
| | Manganda | | | 99 | | | | | | | | |
| | Kataete | | | 93 | | 4 | | | | 4 | | |
| | Kamukya | | | 46 | | 8 | | 8 | | | | |
| | Martin Memorial | | 4 | 72 | | | 4 | | | | | |
| | Aggrey Memorial | | | 94 | 3 | | | | | | | |
| | S.M.K. Mehta Arya | 3 | 5 | 74 | | | 3 | 3 | | 3 | | |
| <u>West Buganda</u> | Munyonyo | | | 92 | | | | | | 4 | | |
| | Bugobango | | | 96 | | | | | | 4 | | |
| | Kaggulwa | | | 92 | 4 | | | 4 | | | | |
| | Mabuya-Katende | | | 100 | | | | | | | | |
| | Maddu | | 5 | 85 | | | | 10 | | | | |
| | Makulungo | | | 100 | | | | | | | | |
| | Mpigi | | | 100 | | | | | | | | |
| | Mabusanku Equatorial | | | 97 | | | | | | 3 | | |
| | Uganda Star College | | | 94 | | | | | | | | |
| | Buddo Junior | | | 82 | | 2 | 5 | | | | | |
| | St. John Bosco | 6 | | 81 | 2 | 2 | | | 2 | | | |
| | Oyaya | | | 93 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| | Mwerve | | | 100 | | | | | | | | |
| | Namanya Ed. Inst. | 4 | | 96 | | | | | | | | |
| | Namugongo Girls' | 3 | | 90 | 3 | | | | | | | |
| | Saanda | | | 90 | 3 | | 3 | | | | | |
| | Kiteezi | 4 | | 88 | 4 | | | | | | | |
| | Bukasa New Model | | 7 | 93 | | | | | | | | |
| <u>North & South</u> | <u>Karamoja</u> | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Kotido Girls' | 19 | | 5 | 10 | | | | | | | |
| | Kales | 9 | | | 6 | | | | | | | |
| | Namalu | 19 | | 2 | 14 | | | | | | | |
| | Kiru | 10 | 3 | | | | | | | | | |
| <u>Busia</u> | Muyende | | | 3 | 97 | | | | | | | |
| | Bukinyola | | | | 100 | | | | | | | |
| | Bubirabi | 2 | | 2 | 89 | 2 | | | | | 2 | |
| | Nammasi | | | 36 | 26 | 10 | | | | | 19 | |
| | Malugugu | | | 5 | 86 | | | | | | 3 | |
| | Mabunali | | | | 100 | | | | | | | |
| | Mabweya | | | 7 | 68 | 12 | | | | | 7 | |
| | Masugu | | | 3 | 97 | | | | | | | |
| | Bucena | | | | 100 | | | | | | | |
| | Cubizale | | | | 100 | | | | | | | |
| | Bumasiya | | | | 96 | | | | | | | |
| | Butsongola | | | | 100 | | | | | | | |
| | Buluchoke | | | | 100 | | | | | | | |
| | Bulvala | | | 4 | 96 | | | | | | | |
| | Bumasiya | | | | 100 | | | | | | | |
| | Kabasanda (URWA) | | | | 98 | | | | | | | |

Table 1 shows the proportion of students in each school who speak a given language. Thus in the first school - Haibale in Tooro District - 42% of the children use Acholi as their mother tongue; 4% use Luganda, and 55% Lutoro. If one were to teach each child in his mother tongue at Haibale school, one would have to have teachers and materials in three languages: Acholi, Lutoro and Luganda.⁴

Twenty-two percent of the Ugandan classrooms are monolingual, that is to say, the mother tongue is the same for every child. In another 22% two mother tongues are present. Seventeen percent of the classrooms contain four mother tongues. The range (Table 2) is from 1 to 12; that is 12 languages in the same classroom. Forty-seven percent of the classrooms contain four or more languages; the average is 3.8. Essentially what this means is that for classrooms in Uganda, mother tongue instruction for each child would often require an availability of more than three languages in each classroom.

Schools in urban areas and in the northern regions⁵ clearly have the more linguistically heterogeneous school populations. Yet it would be a mistake to suggest that linguistic heterogeneity was confined to one or another region. No region, nor rural area, has solely monolingual classrooms.⁶

The policy of mother tongue instruction is not without possibilities for compromise in implementation. It would be better, some might argue, to teach in the mother tongue of the 90%, even if the other 10% would be handicapped. Yet if compromises are made which handicap 10%, then it is not accurate to describe the policy as mother tongue instruction: vernacular yes, but mother tongue no. Moreover, if policy is designed on the basis of expediency, it is not clear where the lines of efficiency should be drawn. If there are four languages in a classroom and the largest percentage of speakers of one language is 40% should one teach in that language though the majority would be handicapped? Perhaps one should make the decision on the basis of geographical region? In Tooro region Lutoro is the most populous language. But Haibale and Kyarusosi schools are situated in areas of high Acholi migration. In their classrooms 42% and 46% of the students speak Acholi. Choosing Lutoro in this instance would be a severe disadvantage to those individuals, and this would create political tension.⁷ Similar circumstances would emerge in Namunsi and Nabweya schools in Bugisu district. Though situated in a district where Lugisu is widely spoken, the majority of students in those two schools speak languages other than Lugisu; in their case the majority would

⁴ And two families of languages since Acholi is derived from Nilotic origins and Luganda and Lutoro from Bantu origins.

⁵ Where children of civil servants come from widely dispersed areas.

⁶ Future work on this question should include the proportion of school children who are bi or trilingual. This might make policy options more feasible.

⁷ Lambert (1967) finds that learning in a second language depends upon the desire to become a part of an ethnolinguistic group.

be placed at a disadvantage were Lugisu to be chosen as its médium of instruction for that district.

It remains an open question as to whether mother tongues instruction is logistically feasible. In Uganda what we know from these data is this: (i) that there is no district or rural area without multi-lingual schools; (ii) that only 20% of the schools have monolingual populations; and (iii) if mother tongue instruction were implemented without exception, this would mean that teaching would have to be conducted in more than 31 languages, with an average of four being used in each classroom.

Table 2
Number of Mother Tongues
Within the Same Ugandan
Primary School Classroom^a

| Number of Mother Tongues | Percentage of Classrooms | (N) |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------|
| 1 | 22 | (14) |
| 2 | 22 | (14) |
| 3 | 9 | (6) |
| 4 | 17 | (11) |
| 5 | 5 | (3) |
| 6 | 8 | (5) |
| 7 | 6 | (4) |
| 8 | 5 | (3) |
| 9 | 5 | (3) |
| 10 | - | - |
| 11 | - | - |
| 12 | 2 | (1) |
| | 100 | (64) |

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^a Asian and European languages have been excluded.

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Résumé.

Il y a trois facteurs qu'il faut bien peser avant d'investir des fonds dans l'enseignement en langues minoritaires. Primo: le coût des matériaux. Secundo: les frais encourus, s'il y en a, en matière de cognition. Tertio: la simple logistique de la réalisation. La présente étude s'adresse à ce dernier problème. En s'appuyant sur un échantillon représentatif des écoles primaires dans un pays d'Afrique de l'Est, on constate que les 22% seulement des salles de classes sont monolingues; dans les 47% des salles il se parle quatre langues ou plus encore. Les problèmes que posent l'hétérogénéité linguistique à l'intérieur même de la salle de classe doivent être résolus avant que la politique de l'enseignement en langues maternelles minoritaires puisse être mise en œuvre.