What does school language mapping contribute to effective MLE programming?

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2.1 Introduction

Language plays a pertinent role in effective teaching and learning. Research shows that teacher-pupil interaction is important to pupils’ progress, particularly in the early years of school. In fact, children who understand the language of instruction in school are more likely to enroll in school on time and attend school regularly and are less likely to drop out of school (Shaeffer 2020; Pflepsen and Pallangyo 2019).

In addition, multilingualism is a way of life for three-quarters of the human race (David Crystal 2006, in Lid 2018). Although there seems to be a decline in languages due to migration, urbanization, and other factors, in reality, there are about 7000 living languages actively used in the world today (Eberhard 2021). This is partly because of a renewed global resolve to maintain local, regional, and national languages (Lid 2018). People acquire different languages in order to interact effectively in different environments. In some contexts, individuals speak the ethnic language to identify with their culture and people. They speak the official language in meetings, and the language of wider communication for non-formal interactions such as trade (Holmes 2013).

In an increasingly globalized world, multilingualism is important in creating effective communication across cultures. It is practiced differently based on the context and the language policies in place (Stein-Smith 2016). It is this understanding that motivates us to think about how different countries deal with multilingual situations, especially in education. A question could then be asked: Is multilingualism a barrier to effective learning? Research done by Mueller (2021) on code-mixing among multilingual children in Germany and Spain revealed that multilingual children only use the instructor’s language, even those who do not have good proficiency in the language. Is this really the case in other places? Language mapping seeks to answer questions like these, through investigation of language
attitudes, existing language policies, pupils’ linguistic competence, and performance in a given location. This paper reviews the role of language mapping in effective MLE programming.

## 2.2 Context

It is worth noting that a huge majority of people who speak international languages, such as Arabic, Portuguese, French, Spanish, and Mandarin, use these languages as second, third, or later-acquired speech varieties, thereby supporting the statement that there are more multilingual individuals in the world than there are monolinguals (Tucker 2001). The use of multiple languages in different parts of the world can be attributed to the heterogeneity of some countries, such as Singapore; or to religious attitudes, such as the way the Sanskrit language marks Hinduism and the Pali language marks Buddhism (Tucker 2001). In many African nations, colonialism contributed to multilingualism because national boundaries were drawn arbitrarily by colonialists without a critical review of the cultural and linguistic realities of the time (Vilhanova 2018). Wide and diverse cultural and linguistic groups remain despite the borders, resulting in the existence of trans-border languages in most African nations (Nkonko 2018).

### 2.2.1 Theoretical issues

Languages operate within certain environments. The location, purpose, people’s attitudes, and policy environments are important considerations to review.

### 2.2.2 Language policy

In language planning, the selection of languages of instruction in schools is of utmost importance, since these languages affect children’s ability to learn (Alidou et al. 2006). Research has shown the obvious benefits of using indigenous languages in education, such as increased academic achievement, the development of a strong foundation for learning other languages, and a sense of cultural identity (Rajathurai 2020), to mention but a few. Despite these benefits, there is a policy formulation trend that mandates foreign languages of instruction in the first few years of compulsory schooling, before a strong foundation in a language that learners understand has been put in place, as is evident in Uruguay and Hungary (Enever 2020).

In Africa and elsewhere, a number of negative views persist around local languages: that multilingualism is an obstacle to national unity; that indigenous languages are not equipped to serve as medium of education; and the fear of isolation from developed countries (Ouane and Glanz 2011). Even the countries that have policy support for the use of indigenous languages in the primary grades experience a disconnect between theory and practice, with a general preference for the colonial languages (Trudell 2016). In this context, the majority of children in Africa are taught in a colonial language, even though they start school with limited or no ability in those languages (Evans and Acosta 2020). Although most African countries give emphasis to international languages for education, only
10–15 percent of the African population is fluent in these languages (UNESCO 2010 in Nyaga 2013). Approximately 2500 languages are spoken in Africa (UNESCO 2010 in Nyaga 2013); out of these, only 176 languages are used for education (Gadelii 2004 in Nyaga 2013). That being the case, most pupils achieve poor learning outcomes with many dropping out of school before finishing the primary level (Pflepsen and Pallangyo 2019).

In order to strengthen multilingual practices, there is a need to enhance language-in-education policies in multilingual contexts. This will go a long way to show the significance of multilingualism in a fast-paced world (Okal 2014). Countries with enacted laws that support bilingual education include the United States of America, which enacted the Bilingual Education Act in 1968, thus catalyzing the formulation of the Bilingual-Bicultural Act in California in 1976 and as a result, creating a supportive environment for children whose primary language was not English. In Canada, the 1969 Languages Act stipulated that English and French will be used as official languages at the federal level. Other countries with officially supported multilingualism through legislation include Belgium, South Africa, and Switzerland (Okal 2014). Having a clear policy framework that supports multilingualism is the most strategic way of ensuring that policy implementers understand the benefits of multilingualism.

2.2.3 Multilingual education

Multilingualism is a reality in most parts of the world. Countries such as Belgium, Switzerland, South Africa, and Nigeria are highly multilingual (Okal 2014). Over the years, many African governments have held onto myths that view multilingualism as an impediment to national unity and technological advancement, and as too expensive to implement especially in education. As a result, some of these countries have chosen a trans-ethnic language or colonial ones for education (Ouane and Glanz 2011). Research has, however, shown that multilingualism among children promotes better social adaptability, and improves reasoning and thinking skills while enhancing cognitive abilities (Okal 2014). It is, therefore, important for multilingualism to be entrenched into education in order to produce solid and well-rounded individuals. Further, in mother tongue-based multilingual education, the mother tongue is a bridge to the acquisition of other languages (Beban 2013). This basically confirms that multilingualism does not impede but aids in the learning process, including learning of other languages.

2.3 Contributions of language mapping to effective MLE programming

The main purpose of language mapping is to identify and document information on language relationships and use (Kindell 1991). In a school environment, for instance, language mapping involves identifying the languages that are spoken by the children in the target group; this information can then be compared to the language(s) used for instruction.
2.3.1 Identifying discrepancies

Language mapping creates awareness of any discrepancy between language policy and practice, and what is being practiced is measured against the policy stipulations. If policy and practice are not aligned, the data gives information on why this is the case, and consequently, gives pointers to what could be done to mitigate the situation.

Language mapping discloses the percentage composition of various languages in multilingual classrooms. This gives information on the language continuum from the dominant to the least spoken home languages in the targeted classes. The report also reveals the languages that are used for instruction in class.

Additionally, language mapping reveals any mismatch between home languages and those used for instruction in schools. Here, it is generally agreed that children learn best in a language that they understand. Since most school compositions in Sub-Saharan Africa are multilingual, the mapping exercise identifies the percentage of children taught in a language other than their home language. Based on this data, recommendations can be made on the best strategy for encouraging the use of home language(s), especially at the primary level of school.

Language mapping focuses on the linguistic repertoire of the catchment area for the targeted schools. In this case, the questions one would ask include the following: Is there a lingua franca on the study site? And if there is, which language is it? Is it a local, regional, national, or official language? This information gives context and ensures that the languages spoken in schools are not viewed in isolation.

2.3.2 Catalyst for action

Arguably, language mapping is a catalyst for action since the findings from the mapping exercises create awareness of any discrepancy between language policy and practice, thereby driving policy implementers to enforce stipulations of the law while drawing attention to challenges in the sector. Language mapping reports are often used as the basis for monitoring policy implementation by government agencies and progress in the education sector. In response, measures can be put in place by government agencies and other stakeholders. Some of the measures include teacher recruitment, teacher training, management of multilingual classes, and materials development. The overall effect of this is improvement in the quality of education that the learners experience.

Language mapping changes the perception of education stakeholders from viewing multilingualism as a barrier to viewing it as the resource that it is in education. Understanding the percentage composition of the language varieties spoken in a class is important in identifying and recommending effective strategies for instructing learners who may come from different linguistic and cultural contexts. Since all children go to school with knowledge ‘stored’ in their home language, each language should be given attention.

Language mapping also reveals the language situation and identifies any mismatch between the home language and those that are used for instruction in schools. This information is important in the recommendation of the most appropriate languages for instruction in class depending on the context.
This, in turn, enables pupils to learn in languages that they understand and thereby reap the benefits of learning in familiar languages, the result of which is good learning outcomes.

Moreover, the linguistic composition outside the school environment is of interest because it has an influence on pupils’ language choices in schools. As such, the function that the lingua franca plays in a particular location, such as trade, determines the extent and motivation for its use in the community. In most cases, the lingua franca used for trade is most likely spoken in other domains as well as by children in schools.

2.3.3 Identifying language mismatches

In Kenya, the Teacher Service Commission, a body that recruits teachers, has a policy for teacher transfers. In some schools, teachers in the lower grades are transferred regularly. Whereas these transfers are intended to bring about equity and balance of teachers in schools, the practice affects multilingual education initiatives because some of the trained teachers that speak the local language may be transferred to schools in other counties, thereby creating a gap. When this happens, it is not uncommon to find a school with the entire teaching staff speaking languages not spoken by the learners in the school. Instances have also been reported of teachers teaching in their own mother tongues, even when none of the children in their classes speak that language (Nyaga and Anthonissen 2012; Nyaga 2013). This mostly results from not having teachers who speak the languages spoken by the learners, occasioned by teacher placement and transfers.

A language mapping exercise among the Pokomo speakers on the coast of Kenya pointed out a practice of frequent transfers of lower primary teachers without due consideration of the language resources that they bring to class. These findings were discussed with the local education officials and some of the planned transfers were halted. In addition, education officials agreed that they will only transfer lower primary school teachers if they have replacements that can speak the languages of the catchment area.

Similarly, the findings of a mapping exercise done in Amudat District, Uganda, revealed that children at the lower level sit for exams in English while the policy does not even allow exams at that level. This was a cause for concern by officials from the government agency involved in curriculum development. Eventually, the agency promised to monitor schools and visit the area more.

There have also been multiple cases of mismatch between the languages of instruction and children’s home languages. In Indonesia, for instance, although Bahasa is the national language, and is also taught in schools, children from communities farther away from the cities such as Maluku are disadvantaged because they understand very limited Bahasa (ACDP 2014). Here, language mapping exercises can be said to highlight these challenges. The assessments also give recommendations, such as the selection of teachers who speak the local variety in cases where this is possible, to mitigate these disadvantages.
2.3.4 Limitations

The recommendations that result from language mapping can only be implemented if the language in education policy allows the use of multiple languages for education. The language policy which dictates the language(s) of instruction in schools is thus the framework for any of the recommended strategies.

In some contexts, there are a limited number of teachers at the lower levels of the school who speak the languages of their school’s catchment area. This makes it difficult for any meaningful multilingual education strategy to work.

Another limitation is teachers’ and education stakeholders’ perceptions of multilingual education. Some of them believe that multilingual education is a barrier to academic achievement and competence in the learned languages. This is not the case, especially given the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) theory by Cummins, which states that proficiency in the first language is important in learning and mastery of the second language and the development of cognitive skills in both languages (Guzmán 2008).

2.4 Conclusion

School language mapping lays bare the languages that are spoken in schools, their catchment areas, and the various functions of these languages. At the centre of this inquiry is the question of whether or not children are learning in a language that they speak and understand. Practical experience has shown that policymakers and implementers may make assumptions about certain languages based on anecdotal evidence; this in turn has a negative impact on the selection of the appropriate languages for instruction in schools. Language mapping is the bridge over this knowledge gap. The findings are evidence-based, with contextual and practical recommendations.

Language policies are at the core of robust multilingual education strategies. There is, therefore, a need to find out more about language policies in Sub-Saharan Africa, the motivation behind these policies, and why there is limited alignment between policy and practice.

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