What can be done in contexts where teachers have inadequate oral fluency or literacy skills in one or more of the languages being used in the program?

Stephen L. Walter, PhD

1 Introduction

It is given that the knowledge and skills of classroom teachers (or lack thereof) will impact the quality of their instructional work in the classroom. Further, most models of education simply assume that teachers have proficiency (oral, reading, writing) in the language of instruction and that a high level of effective two-way communication can be taken for granted in the classroom. This latter assumption is coming under increasing scrutiny as national and international researchers continue to improve their understanding of the reasons for educational failure in a broad range of educational settings.

The issue of teacher proficiency in the language of instruction takes on special relevance in linguistically diverse countries which have chosen to deliver primary education in a colonial or other language having few or relatively few native speakers. What are the consequences of having teachers who lack proficiency in the national language of instruction? Research in Namibia, for example, indicated that just 2 percent of public school teachers in that country possessed the levels of proficiency in English deemed necessary to be an effective teacher (the Guardian 2012; Harris 2011). The author recalls receiving messages written in Spanish by teachers who were non-native speakers of Spanish that were barely readable for the many grammatical and orthographic errors they contained. Under these constraints, instructional effectiveness is reduced by poor communication skills, by inadequate mastery of basic educational jargon and technical terms, and by an inability to teach correct use of the target language.

At the same time, efforts to provide instruction in local languages (MLE or MTB-MLE programs) in such contexts also encounter the issue of linguistic deficits in teachers but of a different sort. Such teachers typically have full oral proficiency and are able to communicate fully and freely with their students. However, they often lack skill in reading and writing the language—indispensable skills in providing good instruction to children in how to read and write their language properly. This lack of skill is not due to academic laziness but rather to the fact that the languages involved are only beginning to be developed for educational purposes at the same time that teachers are being recruited and trained to teach in these local languages. Too often, these teachers have never before seen their language in writing nor had practice in reading material written in the language. Even if they have had such experience, it has not been sufficient to develop the kinds of proficiency teachers need to provide quality instruction.

2 Theoretical context

2.1 Cognitive deficits at the instructional level

Numerous researchers (e.g., Cummins 1978, 1984; Collier 1989) have pointed out that there are critical stages in the development of proficiency in a second language and that these stages play a critical role in the ability of children to benefit from instruction in that second language. Specifically, it is posited
that children who have reached only a BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) level of proficiency are not ready to deal with educational content which is more linguistically demanding. Rather, a higher level of proficiency—identified as CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency)—is required to benefit from instruction at this level.

While this model has gained considerable credibility in the educational world, little work has been done to extend this model to the performance of classroom teachers. If a teacher has reached only a BICS level of language proficiency in the language of the classroom, it is reasonable to ask, How well has the teacher learned content which is more linguistically and cognitively demanding? Further, if a teacher has not mastered an idea or a concept, how effective will that teacher be when trying to teach the idea or concept to students? See, for example, the research done in Cameroon by the author, Walter 2012, on teachers’ proficiency in mathematics.

2.2 Plateau effects in language and academic development

The pyramid model of Thomas and Collier (1997) suggests that when language, cognitive, and academic development do not proceed in parallel, one tends to be left with permanent deficits in one or more of these areas. Many have observed, informally, that it is very common for second language learners to arrive at—and stay at—a developmental plateau in their language proficiency. This tendency appears to hold widely among teachers who are teaching in a second language. Whether one can move beyond this plateau is an issue to be addressed.

2.3 Language development issues in education

A common, and perhaps unconscious, assumption among educators is that the language of instruction in the classroom has already undergone all of the development needed to function as a language of instruction. When the language of instruction is an international language like English or Spanish, this is a safe assumption to make. However, when the focus shifts to the use of local languages in low-income countries, such languages almost certainly will need further development to become robust vehicles of instruction.

While this need for further development is readily recognized at the level of curriculum development, there is also a need to recognize that teachers are going to be affected. How does a teacher explain the concepts of “place value” or “circumference” if there is no local term of these notions or no decisions have been made on how to explain them?

3 Recommendations: Some ideas to try

3.1 Dealing with deficiencies in L2

The research is quite clear that second language learning is a function of time on task. By this is meant that one’s mastery of a second language improves to the extent that one spends time seeking to improve. At the same time, it is also clear that a person tends to stay on a given level if that person uses what he or she has learned on a regular basis but makes no concerted effort to improve. The following sections list some of the actions which can be taken to improve students’ proficiency in L2.

3.1.1 Oral and written improvement

Reading circles

A reading circle is a small group of people who get together on a regular basis to discuss something that they have all read. A reading circle includes at least the following components:
1. Everyone reads the same book, often a novel, written in L2;
2. Each person records in a notebook words, phrases, or idioms which he or she does not know;
3. Each person looks up the word or phrase in a dictionary, records the meaning, and uses the word in
   a new sentence to help solidify the word in memory;
4. When the reading circle meets (typically once a week), the members of the reading circle discuss
   what was read including giving special attention to the new words and phrases learned;
5. Members of the reading circle make a real effort to use words and phrases which were learned from
   recent previous sessions.

3.1.2 Vocabulary development and enrichment

A person at a BICS level of language proficiency in L2 can function reasonably well on a limited
vocabulary of just 1,500–2,000 words. By contrast, the English-language textbooks for Grades 1 to 6 in
Cameroon contain a vocabulary of close to 7,000 words. Based on a number of studies of the English
content of textbooks published for primary school students in the U.S., Nagy and Herman (1987)
estimated that Grade 3 students have a reading vocabulary of 10,000 words, and that young people
leave high school with a vocabulary of approximately 50,000 word families. Research done by this
author in Cameroon indicated that Cameroonian teacher trainees (who were about to graduate) did not
know many of the 7,000 words in the English-language curriculum.

To be an effective teacher using an L2, teachers desperately need to upgrade their vocabularies in
that language. An obvious focus of such vocabulary development would be the technical terms
contained in the school curriculum. At regional or provincial levels, education officials could prepare
educational dictionaries of key terms that teachers (and eventually students) need to know in order to
teach school content effectively. Walter (2005) suggested that teachers or schools develop vocabulary
modules to be included in the curriculum as new content is introduced (for middle school and above).
The evidence is pretty clear that such modules would benefit teachers as well as students.

A major function of education is teaching younger children to read and write. If teachers lack
proficiency in these areas, their students will as well. The major reason for the lack of skill development
in reading is lack of practice. It follows, then, that the best route to improvement is getting practice—
the more the better.

3.1.3 Improving writing

Improving one’s skill in reading will also improve one’s proficiency in writing. However, improvement
in writing also requires feedback and instruction. Therefore, improvement in the development of
writing skills requires deliberate and guided instruction usually in a formal setting such as a classroom
or workshop. A workshop or semi-structured framework which gives instruction, requires writing
exercises, and extensive feedback including correction is needed to promote significant improvement in
writing skills.

3.2 Dealing with instructional deficiencies

Two techniques for addressing instructional deficiencies due to language deficiencies not already
addressed, include the following:
1. Training or instruction on the use of logical connections, rhetoric, and argumentation. Accomplishing
   this goal usually requires training, such as in a workshop environment.
2. The development and provision of detailed lesson plans. Typically, teachers with significant lan-
guage limitations resort to terse and abbreviated teaching activities which are inadequate for teaching
the needed content. Such teachers will often also resort to depending on various time-
consuming but ineffective strategies such as extensive copying from the blackboard and choral
chanting by students. The development and use of detailed lesson plans is one way to support teachers with weak L2 proficiency.

3.3 Dealing with deficiencies in L1

The language deficiencies observed in teachers using the L1 for instructional purposes in MLE programs in low-income countries contrast significantly with those seen in teachers using an L2 for instructional purposes. For example, oral proficiency is not an issue for the former with the possible exception of the educational jargon needed for the classroom.

3.3.1 Deficiencies in reading and writing

In the case of most MLE initiatives in low-income countries (and some in developed countries), it will often be the case that teachers or prospective teachers will have little or no experience in reading and writing their own L1, the intended language of instruction in the program. Accordingly, several steps need to be taken. First, the initial training program needs to give substantial attention to developing initial skill in reading and writing the L1. Second, program supervisors need to incorporate regular in-service and follow-up training/practice in reading and writing the L1. Third, program managers need to make regular assignments which give teachers practice in reading and writing the L1. Fourth, to safeguard the quality of instruction, program managers need to assess teachers at some point to ensure progress towards mastery.

Consistency in spelling at the classroom level is a common problem in the early phases of MLE programs. This problem can be addressed by putting together a basic dictionary of common words in the target language. While this kind of project is not commonly seen as an educational task, it is nonetheless important as a means of supporting teachers teaching for the first time in their L1 when they have had little experience writing the language.

3.3.2 Deficiencies in technical and educational jargon

Teachers teaching in the L1—even those with teacher experience—may lack a command of the technical and educational jargon of the classroom and the content areas of instruction. Basic terms such as blackboard, chalk, erase, practice, sentence, paragraph, title, author, letter, capital, number, alphabet, etc., may not have local terms to express these notions. As the content of instruction becomes more difficult, the number of technical terms will increase dramatically and teachers will need support in how to deal with these terms.

The suggested solution is that program managers put together a guide or dictionary of educational terms to be used in the classroom. Once developed, this guide or dictionary should be both incorporated into teacher training programs and in-services, and should be distributed to all teachers so that they can study and master the terms needed for the classroom.

3.3.3 Instructional deficiencies related to teaching in L1

With experience, early grade teachers develop many intuitions and “rules of thumb” on such basic issues as letters which will be difficult to teach, words which will be easy or difficult for students to learn, how much help students will need to master a given element or concept, what instructions and strategies work best for teaching such skills as phonemic awareness or decoding, etc. In the early phases of an MLE program, teachers lack such intuitions and rules of thumb for teaching children to read and write in L1. Program managers and curriculum writers can help teachers by (a) regularly interacting with them to identify problem areas in teaching reading and writing and (b) providing lesson plans and supplementary instructional materials to address what turn out to be problem areas in teaching literacy in a given language.
References


