



How can informal and non-formal learning opportunities in the mother tongue best support or supplement school settings, particularly when the formal school system is unable to serve as a venue for mother tongue-based multilingual education?

Rudy Klaas

1 Introduction

In many environments, multilingual education (MLE) is not being implemented in the formal school system because the potential for MLE has yet to be realized. The pedagogical advantages of teaching in a language that both teachers and students understand well have not been understood by national or local governments, parents, teachers, school directors, and students. At the same time, these very environments often intentionally facilitate or passively permit the implementation of non-formal or informal mother tongue learning opportunities, in particular, mother tongue literacy. When this is the case, we may ask if there is not potential for the transfer of good practices, skills, and positive attitudes about learning from the non-formal and informal systems to an eventual MLE program in the formal school system.

One example of a situation where non-formal mother tongue literacy for children took place before a pilot mother tongue education program was officially endorsed is that of the Pokomo [pkb] community in Kenya. Classes were provided in church buildings after the school day and within the school building for older students before lessons began. The language study, updated orthography, and a corpus of adults literate in Pokomo from which volunteer teachers were drawn were invaluable to the development of the mother tongue education program. The teaching practice was somewhat different from that followed by the volunteer teachers since it needed to fit more closely with the Early Childhood Development classes in which the mother tongue education program began. However, many of the teachers were previously taught Pokomo literacy in the non-formal setting of the Pokomo Language Project. The Pokomo story books on which much of the mother tongue education was based were also written by these teachers. The informal setting also provided space for training teachers and raising awareness of parents and other community members through discussions about mother tongue literacy and its value in education.

2 Context

While non-formal and informal mother tongue literacy has its own inherent benefits, many benefits are also transferable to the formal school setting and are likely to have important positive impact. They include the development of positive attitudes and behaviors towards reading, transferable learning skills and learning strategies, linguistic research, effective learning and teaching techniques, and a draft format for formal school materials.

Positive attitudes and behaviors towards reading can be weak or absent in formal school when students do not sufficiently understand the language they are reading. In such situations, reading can be reduced to mere decoding and pronunciation of chunks of letters or memorized words, phrases, or sentences. To the contrary, non-formal or informal literacy in a known language removes the language barrier and allows students to recognize and interact with the meaning of a text. Students develop con-

confidence as they see that their ability to ascertain meaning is growing. They anticipate the successful discovery of information, as well as pleasure, and persevere until they find it, as opposed to abandoning the search for meaning that is hidden in a language they do not know. Students develop the reflex of reading when encountering a text, in or out of school, as well as a desire to explore its meaning instead of developing the habit of avoiding texts, expecting to be defeated in their struggle to derive meaning. In addition, the removal of the language barrier allows students to discuss a text among themselves and with teachers, debating and thinking critically as well as imaginatively.

3 Recommendations: Some ideas to try

As mentioned above, non-formal mother tongue literacy has its own inherent benefits. Apart from the acquisition of transferable reading skills and positive attitudes and expectations towards reading, mother tongue literacy reinforces ethnic identity and community cohesion and allows a medium for the expression and continued appreciation of local values. Furthermore, parents who have benefitted from mother tongue adult literacy will be able to apply themselves in reading situations with their own children or with other children. While this is particularly true when the reading situation occurs in a common language, it is also true across languages when parents can apply transferable sound/symbol relationships, reading strategies, and attitudes to reading another language. A literate parent provides a positive role model for early learners.

Through initial success in non-formal or informal reading initiatives, positive attitudes towards reading have been observed to emerge from recently reticent or antagonistic communities. As has been my personal observation in DRC, Senegal, Mali, Gambia, Kenya, Uganda, and among Darfur refugees, many communities are convinced that their own language is not readable since they have never seen it written and so believe that it cannot be written. Once taught to use even a few rudimentary reading techniques or guided to transfer their reading skills in another language to the reading of their own, they quickly deduce that their language is indeed readable and enthusiastically set about the task of learning to read and even write in their own language. This is often the first step in the process of developing that language for use in formal school and elsewhere.

The transfer of these attitudes, behaviors, and expectations from non-formal or informal learning opportunities to formal school also presents an occasion for growth on the part of teachers, school administrators, and teacher training institutions. In those cases where school age students participate in non-formal or informal learning opportunities, their ability to find meaning and their expectation that lessons will be interactive challenge formal schools to reconsider learning based on dictation and rote memory. This, however, would require retraining teachers and school administrators who may rather maintain the status quo than exert additional effort. This existing inertia can be challenged by the momentum generated through citizen-led assessments as well as data sharing and empowering local stakeholders as has been done, for example, in India, Kenya, Mali, and Senegal.

Reading skills, whether taught in non-formal opportunities or elsewhere, are often based on common pedagogical approaches and/or techniques and thus many are transferable across education sectors. Those readers present in the local community often attest that they did not have to learn how to read all over again in order to read another language but could, instead, transfer those skills used in reading a first language.

Teaching/learning materials, even while yet in their non-formal or informal format, offer many transferable benefits such as correct orthography and grammar use, a usable scope and sequence as well as the content for letter-specific exercises addressing phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, vocabulary development, fluidity, and comprehension. Once the language in question is approved for use in formal schooling, the pedagogical materials can be adapted to fit the formal school schedule, the formal thematic content, and the text level of the grades implicated. The same would be true for supplementary materials. Significant resources can thereby be saved by adapting non-formal or informal materials to formal school specifications rather than creating materials from scratch.

Along the same lines, teachers and teacher training materials and techniques can be transferred from a non-formal or informal setting to a formal school classroom or even to a formal teacher training

college. As concerns the non-formal teachers' ability to apply best practices in a formal school setting, they are often better trained than many teachers who were not taught best practices in teacher training institutions. They are likewise more experienced in teaching in the mother tongue or national language and are more experienced using participative teaching materials and techniques. Non-formal teachers can be used to model and teach new attitudes, materials, and practices in formal teacher training institutions, though this requires a substantial amount of open-mindedness on the part of formal school structures.

Finally, I would mention an interesting phenomenon observed in DRC, Senegal, and Uganda. In these cases, and undoubtedly in many more that have escaped my attention, students that have failed in the official language formal school system have had recourse to non-formal or informal mother tongue reading programs. Here, language is no longer a barrier to understanding teaching instructions or lesson content. Many quickly learn the transferable skills and concepts of reading through the use of their own language, and this has become, upon return to formal school, the trampoline which propels them even higher than their re-found classmates and friends who continue to struggle with the language barrier. While their abilities in the foreign language might not have improved significantly, they now excel at decoding and word recognition and are motivated to renew their efforts in foreign language learning by the knowledge that there is indeed, with a little more effort, meaning to be found in text.

Adults who are learning to read and write their mother tongue could write stories or songs specifically for children in a particular class. This could be done in exercise books with drafts being written until they are satisfied, whereupon the final edition could be "published" by being written in a book kept for that purpose.

4 Conclusion

Though education policy in many African countries recognizes the right and the pedagogical benefit of using familiar languages in education, that policy is often not yet implemented in practice. Non-governmental and faith based organizations have, nonetheless, been active in this area for many decades, having already studied the linguistic foundation for orthography development, having already tested reading methodologies as appropriate to that particular language, having produced reading materials, and having developed teacher training materials and procedures. Great potential exists for a transfer to formal schools of learning attitudes, reading skills and strategies, teaching/learning materials, as well as positive local working relationships.