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## Adopting the child-centred pedagogy for teaching reading and writing in Local Language

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# **Chapter 1**

General introduction

## **1.1 Introduction**

Early Education in the developing countries, especially those that are linguistically diverse is typically of low quality (Singh, 2014; Abijo, 2014) and yet education is the gateway to development and a human right. According to some reports, the low quality of education has not only resulted into the inequities and marginalisation of rural peoples but also retarded the general national progress towards development (Riddell, 2006, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2003 & Aref, 2011). The low quality of education is linked to language because in all education systems, language is a fundamental medium of effective communication in educational processes (Tembe & Norton, 2011; Webb, Lepota, & Ramagoshi, 2004). It is through language that innovative ideas, skills and knowledge are constructed, shared and transmitted from one person to another (Ouane, 2003).

The language used for communication could be mother tongue (MT) or first language (L<sub>1</sub>) or foreign or all, though of recent there is a shift towards using the mother tongues or language(s) that the learner is familiar with as medium of instruction (MoI) for the first three to four years of education (Clegg & Afitska, 2011; Ouane & Glanz, 2010; Alidou, Broke-Utne, Santana, Heugh & Wolff, 2006). According to Ouane and Glanz (2010, p. 62) mother tongue or first language (L<sub>1</sub>) in a broader sense is the language or languages of the immediate environment and daily interaction which 'nurture' the child in the first four years of life. National Curriculum Development Centre [NCDC] (2008) defines mother tongue as the first language an infant is exposed to as soon as he/she gets to communicate verbally. It adds that children learn their

mother tongue naturally through imitating sounds from their immediate environment. The mother tongue is closely linked to the child's growth and development. However, children get influenced by a language spoken in the community where they live and play. Such language is referred to as a local language. The local language is understood by the majority of the people in an area, including those whose mother tongue is different.

Several studies in sub-Saharan Africa increasingly recognize the importance of mother tongue education. For instance, Nigeria (Fakeye & Soyinka, 2009; Adebayo, 2008), Ghana (Owu-Ewie, 2006; Kingsley, 2002), Malawi (Henri et al., 2003), Zambia (Dzinyela, 2001; Williams, 1997), Kenya (Ogechi, 2003; Muthwii, 2002; Bunyi, 2001), Uganda (Acana, Kyagaba, Opman, Omala, Jumanyol, & Sserunkuma, 2010, 2005; Ahabwe, 2011; Draku, 2011; Akello, 2009; Muthwii, 2002; MoES, 2001), South Africa (Nel and Muller, 2010; Joseph & Ramani, 1998), Ethiopia (Heugh, Benson, Bogale, & Yohannes, 2007), WCEFA (1990), and UNESCO (2000). Most of these countries use mother tongue as MoI in the primary schools, alongside a second language, either French or English or Portuguese or Afrikaans.

## **1.2 Uganda's Education System**

Uganda's education system was modelled on the 7-4-2-3 tier system of the British which has existed since the Castle Commission Report of 1963. The four-tier model of education includes both academic and technical training and it consists of 3 years of pre-primary, 7 years of primary education, 6 years of secondary education (divided into 4 years of ordinary secondary and 2 years of advanced secondary school), and 3 to 5 years of post-secondary education. Typically, Education in Uganda is

provided through multiple approaches including the Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Systems. The Uganda National Constitution in operation mandates Government to be responsible for leading in the provision of Education. However, individuals, private sector and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are all encouraged to join Government to educate Ugandans. Within the formal sector, Government encourages a diversity of opportunities including general, Vocational and Technical structures (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2001).

The pre-primary level commonly known as the kindergarten, takes three years and children of between three to five years old are the beneficiaries. Enrolment at this level is mostly for children in the urban and peri-urban centres. In the rural areas, however, fewer children benefit from it, because their parents cannot afford the fees and the requirements for education at that level (Ejuu, 2012). The majority of the children in the rural areas therefore join the primary schools at the age of six to seven while their counter parts in the urban centres join kindergarten between the ages of three to four. In addition, there are also few kindergartens in the rural areas. However, recognition of pre-primary as the first 3(three) years of education is a recent development ushered in by the Education Act of 2008 (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2008; Ejuu, 2012).

The next level of education is the seven years of compulsory and free primary education according to the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2008).The primary cycle is divided into lower and upper primary. The lower caters for children from primary one to three while the upper caters for those from primary four to seven with primary four taken as a transition class between lower and upper primary. The official age range is 6 to 12 years though in some

cases the age may go up to 15 years for those who either joined school late, or for those who had challenges in the course of pursuing their primary education especially in the war torn areas of Northern Uganda (Tukundane, Zeelen, Minnaert & Kanyandago, 2014; Sekiwunga & Whyte, 2009; Oleke, Blystad, Fylkesnes & Tumwine, 2007).

At the end of the primary education cycle, a national examination, the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE), is administered. The language of assessment is English throughout the primary cycle in the urban centres, whereas in the rural areas the local language is used for teaching and assessment in lower primary, except for English as a subject taught at the lower level is assessed in English. The language of assessment in the upper primary is English for both the urban and rural schools.

The third level of education is secondary education. This is divided into a four-year cycle of lower secondary for children between the ages of 13 – 16 and a two-year cycle of upper secondary education for children of between 17- 18 years old. The lower secondary level is (supposedly) universal though at the moment it has been rolled out to some selected government owned schools. In addition to the government owned schools, there are private schools that offer secondary education to children too. At the end of the lower secondary cycle, the candidates obtain an ordinary certificate of education whereas at the upper secondary level, they obtain advanced certificate of education. At the secondary level of education, the MoI is English except for Kiswahili and other local languages that are taught at that level. The language of assessment too is generally English except for subjects taught in French, Latin, German and Kiswahili.

The tertiary level runs for two to five years and it consists of universities, colleges of commerce, technical and vocational colleges, teacher training colleges,

nursing and clinical officers' schools. Ideally, all those who go to tertiary institutions acquire skills, knowledge and competencies that either helps them to be employed by others or to get self-employed.

In terms of ownership, all the Kindergartens are privately owned while the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education are both government and privately owned and they are mostly located in the urban and peri-urban areas. The issue of ownership and location of the primary schools plays a big role in determining the MoI and assessment. The practice is that the MoI in privately owned schools is English right from grade one; while in the government owned schools in the rural areas the local language is the MoI for the first three years and English is used for instruction from grade four to seven. The MoI is English throughout the primary cycle of education in the urban centres. In the rural areas however, the MoI is the local language from grades one to three while English is taught as a subject at the first three grades. English only becomes a MoI from grade four to seven and at secondary and tertiary levels.

At the secondary and tertiary levels of education, the MoI is English except for languages like Kiswahili and other local languages that are taught at those levels. Kiswahili, however, has been made compulsory in secondary schools in Uganda since it is believed it will contribute to the regional re-integration at the East African Region (Namyalo & Nakayiza, 2015).

### **1.3 The study context**

The preliminary study was conducted in six primary schools in the districts of Gulu and Amuru and Gulu Municipality. The actual study was conducted in three rural primary schools, one in Gulu district and two in Amuru district. The three schools were

selected because the local language was used as a MoI from grade one to three while English as MoI was used from grade four onwards. The study comprised of 12 teachers of local language, three head-teachers and three deputy head-teachers of the selected schools. Other participants are two Centre Coordinating Tutors (CCTs), a member of the Acoli Language Board, a District Inspector of Schools (DISs) who at the same time is also a member of the Acoli Language Board, a tutor from a Primary Teachers' College (PTC); and finally, 720 pupils of grades one to four.

The focus of the study was on the cohort of pupils that joined grade one in 2012 and those who were in grade two in 2012. The cohorts were monitored for three years until 2015. The number of pupils in the cohort however kept reducing as they were promoted to the next class level though the number is negligible. Of course there were those who left the cohort either because they transferred to other schools or because they dropped off. There were also new entrants from other schools who joined the cohort and these too were incorporated in the study.

The teachers have been on the study right from the beginning in 2012, though four of them were transferred in early 2015 to schools out of the geographical scope of the study. The teachers who were transferred have continued to participate in the study during the feedback and planning meetings. It is interesting to note that out of the 12 teachers who participated in the study, only one was a male.

#### **1.4 The language policy**

Like many African countries and other countries colonised by the Western Governments around the world, Western education in Uganda was introduced by the missionaries and they paved the way for colonisation (Imani, 2009). During the



missionary era bilingual education was paramount and traditional education was conducted in local languages. Between the 1920s and 1940s, the colonial administration maintained local languages as a MoI alongside English. This was because the local languages were crucial for preserving whatever was good in the native customs and most importantly it helped in promoting self-respect in the learners (Phelps-Stokes Commission, 1924 cited in Oketcho, 2014). The local languages were also used in teacher training institutions for training the Licence Teachers (those who were learned but lacked full professional teacher training) and those teachers taught using the local languages.

For a while, the missionaries wholeheartedly promoted the teaching and learning of local languages but due to the need to raise an 'elite' labour force, it quickly became evident for the British that all officers needed to be able to communicate in the language of 'civilisation' (Alidou, Broke-Utne, Santana, Heugh & Wolff, 2006). In spite of the recommendation of the Phelps Stoke Commission, the local languages completely vanished from the academic spheres and English became the main MoI. The shift in preference of the language of instruction affected the education sector and the development of the local languages with the result that English attained the status of an official language. The study materials were produced in English while those for the local languages were not developed in any way; there were no orthographies, no reading materials as compared to English.

According to Ssekamwa and Lugumba (2001), the best educational achievement in Uganda was probably attained during the period when local languages were used as MoI, especially under the tenure of License Teachers. They alluded that in the period

when the local languages were used as the MoI, literacy and numeracy achievements and pass rate at the end of the primary cycle were high. From Ssekamwa and Lugumba's arguments, it is clear that their assessment of children's performance was based on pass rates at the end of the primary cycle as opposed to the different competencies and skills attained on a daily basis.

In 1989 the Government of Uganda set up a Commission to revisit the language policy among other issues of concern (Penny, Michael, Read & Bines, 2008). The Commission stipulated that schools, save for some in urban areas, should teach all subjects, except English, through mother tongues from grade one to three. In addition, every school was mandated to adopt the dominant language of the community, the local language, in which it is situated as a language of instruction or should retain English only if the dominant community language is unclear. English becomes the MoI from Primary four onwards (Government White Paper, 1992). This language policy especially on the local language was not embraced. In 2003 after a decade of struggling with English as the main MoI, the Ministry of Education and Sports in Uganda directed the NCDC to review the curriculum of the lower primary level. The review recommended the re-introduction of the local languages. This is meant to help pupils improve their level of proficiency in reading and writing which was seen as a barrier to the children's full enjoyment of their right to education (NCDC, 2006; UNESCO, 2005, 1958). In promoting mother tongue education Gacheche (2010) asserts that learners who understand the language they are instructed in are more likely to engage meaningfully with content, question what they do not understand and even enjoy the challenges of new things.

This language policy in Uganda depicts the early-exit transition model (Heugh, 2006; Ouane & Glanz, 2010; Alidou et al., 2006; ADEA, 2006). The early exit model compared to the late exit one, however, has been criticised for stopping the use of mother tongue as MoI so early before the child has mastered English as a subject and second language (Orekan, 2011; Heugh, 2013). It can therefore be observed that a major impediment, with the late exits, is that the short duration of using the mother tongue as MoI does not allow the pupils to attain the language competence needed in mother tongue in order to switch over to the second language as MoI. Salami (2008), therefore proposed that the critical period for effective transition to literacy should be extended from the first nine years to the first twelve years before switching to second language; because at 12 years old, children would have acquired sufficient concepts in their MT and would be proficient enough to transfer the acquired knowledge into the second language. Despite the criticism of the early exit model, it has remained in operation and has been adopted in the implementation of the thematic curriculum that was introduced in 2007. Through the thematic curriculum, a teacher presents academic contents in the local language for the first three years and transit to using English as MoI in primary four (Acana et al., 2010; NCDC, 2006).

### **1.5 Benefits of using local language as MoI**

A number of benefits have been attached to the use of MT as MoI for basic education. For example, Butzkamm (2003) pointed out that the MT - for all school subjects, including foreign-language lessons - is the child's strongest ally and should, therefore, be used systematically. He reiterated that using MT helps people to think, communicate and acquire intuitive understanding of grammar. He further emphasised

that using MT would open the door to learning all grammars, which is the greatest asset people bring to the task of foreign language learning. For this reason, the MT is the master key to learning foreign languages, the tool which gives the fastest, surest, most precise, and most complete means of accessing a foreign language. Other benefits of using mother tongue as MoI are:

- Mother tongue proficiency functions as a bridge between the language spoken at home and in school ((Mathooko, 2009; Mohite & Bhatt, 2008); and if children are given a chance to develop their MT skills from pre-school age, their academic performance at school would be better (Mathooko, 2009).
- Mother tongue is the basis for the child to learn therefore making it easier for the child to learn their second language and other school subjects, it strengthens the child's sense of identity (Butzkamm, 2003)
- The mother tongue plays a very important part in a child's identity and self-esteem and maintains the L<sub>1</sub> and culture through educating the children (Praah, 2003)
- Mother tongue provides more effective formal education to children, building on the language skills and aptitudes they have already developed at home (Ball, 2010)
- Parents are more likely to participate in their children's learning when children are taught in the local language (Benson, 2002)
- Use of a familiar language to teach beginning literacy facilitates an understanding of sound-symbol or meaning-symbol correspondence. Learning to read is most efficient when students know the language and can employ psycholinguistic guessing strategies; likewise, students can communicate through writing as soon as they

understand the rules of the orthographic (or other written) system of their language (Benson, 2004).

A number of studies conducted on the MoI are in favour of a language that the child knows better. For example, UNESCO (2005) noted that one of the biggest obstacles to Education For All was the use of foreign languages for teaching and learning. Gacheche (2010) further insisted that a child's home language can effectively be used as a language of instruction in the early years of their schooling as a bridge to learning a foreign language. In a recent study Benson and Kosonen (2013) argued that only those countries where the child's first language is the MoI are likely to achieve the goals of Education for All.

Other scholars advanced the argument that MT is not only a tool which gives the fastest, surest, most precise, and most complete means of accessing a foreign language (Butzkamm, 2003) but it also strengthens the child's sense of identity (Butzkamm, 2003; Praah, 2003) and helps in building the child's self-esteem and maintaining the L<sub>1</sub> and culture (Praah, 2003). And so if children are given a chance to develop their MT skills from pre-school age, their academic performance at school would be better (Mathooko, 2009).

While several studies above have documented the benefits of using local language as MoI; other studies on the contrary have reported persistent challenges relating to the use of L<sub>1</sub> as MoI. For example, rural parents fear that their children would be left behind by children in urban contexts who use English as MoI right from grade one (Muthwii, 2002). In addition, other parents think that the use of mother tongue for instruction is meant to fail their children (Ssentanda, 2013). Teachers on the other hand

are demotivated in implementing the local language policy since the local languages are not examinable by the national examination body. They therefore take it as a waste of time and energies to teach a subject that is not examinable (Ssentanda, 2013).

In a survey conducted by Carol and Kwiri (2013) it was noted that the lack of reference books for the local language would make learners have problems speaking/writing English words. Children may fail to catch up with the Uganda National Examination Board's (UNEB) requirements since examinations are set in English. Other challenges to MT education are conflicts from parents who prefer English because of its connection with job skills (Obiegbo, 2016; Wasike, 2016; Kenya, 2014; Kioko, Ndung'u, Njoroge & Mutiga, 2014; Tembe & Norton, 2011). The challenges for teaching and learning in developing countries are further complicated by linguistic diversity and competing stakeholder expectations and national policies respecting the MoI and the teaching of national, local and international languages (Anderson & Mundy, 2016; Evans & Cleghorn, 2010).

The studies above show varied views on the use of L<sub>1</sub> as MoI with preference towards beginning education with L<sub>1</sub> more especially in monolingual and bilingual societies and shifting to a foreign language gradually. Based on the benefits and challenges of learning in L<sub>1</sub>, it is imperative to find out why children who are taught in the L<sub>1</sub> find difficulties in reading and writing.

## **1.6 The language situation**

The education System in Uganda, especially at lower levels, suffered from years of neglect partly as a result of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war and civil strife since 1980 (McCormac & Benjamin, 2008). This resulted in pupils performing poorly

in speaking, reading and writing; poor enrolment (50% at primary school level) and high drop-out rates (7.8% in lower grades); high attrition rate (50%) and a low completion rate (35% at primary school level); dramatic difference in enrolment between geographical locations and individual schools, and an overall system showing very low efficiency in terms of total cost per child (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2001). This problem is even more complicated in those schools in rural areas that have been affected by the LRA war.

Uganda is a multilingual country where close to 43 languages are spoken (Lewis, 2009) alongside English and Kiswahili; and English is the official as well as the second language (L<sub>2</sub>). The Uganda languages are classified into four major language groups: Bantu, Sudanic, Nilotic (which is itself sub-divided into Eastern Nilotic and Western Nilotic) and Kuliak (see Appendix 1 showing the language groups). According to Ladefoged, Glick & Criper (1972), the largest language family in Uganda is Bantu, comprising almost a third of all the languages spoken in the country. In the Western Nilotic group, there is Lango, Acholi, Alur, Dhopadhola, Kumam, Labwor, Dhopaluo and Nyakwai. The Eastern Nilotic group includes Ateso, Ngakarimojong, Kakwa, Kupsabiny, Jie, Ngadotho and Nyang'i (Ngapore).

Of the 43 (forty-three languages), only five area languages of wider communications have been selected as MoI in lower primary classes. The area languages include: Luo (Acholi, Lango, and Dopadhola), Luganda, Lugbara, Runyakitara (Runyoro/Rutooro, Runyankore/Rukiga), Ateso (Ngakaramojong and its variant), (Ward, Penny & Read, 2006; Government White Paper, 1992 and Viera, 1996, p. 169). The multilingual nature of the population, however, has posed a problem to

policy makers when it comes to choosing the language of instruction and examination in the primary schools (Muthwii, 2002, 4) since not every child, especially in the urban areas, is proficient in the selected area languages.

To address the challenge of implementing the local language policy, the Government of Uganda initiated a number of interventions. Some of the interventions were providing schools with instructional materials, training teachers in the child-centred pedagogy and with knowledge on how to develop additional instructional materials (Penny, et al., 2008). The Centre Coordinating Tutors and District Inspectors of Schools were also trained to monitor and offer curricular support to teachers in the use of local language as MoI from Primary one to three and transition to using English as MoI from Primary four onwards. These trainings were however not adequate (Akello & Timmerman, 2017). For instance, the training for teachers of primary one was conducted for a week while teachers of primary two and three had only two days of training. The reduced duration of training was based on the assumption that teachers of primary two or three were already trained teachers so a short duration of training would be adequate. The assumption however was misleading since the child-centred pedagogy was a new intervention and secondly teachers had not been trained to implement it from the training colleges (Kyeyune, 2012 & Ssentanda, 2014). Teachers, therefore, should have been given ample time for training and practice of the child-centred pedagogy.

It should however be noted that in spite of the pedagogical skills preparation and the provision of instructional materials to schools in support of the implementation of the local language policy, the pupils are still inadequate in literacy both in mother tongue and English. For instance, very few pupils in the districts of Acoli, Lango, Teso,



Busoga, Budaka, Palisa and Tororo were rated as proficient in both local language and English (Acana et al., 2010). Many pupils still experience problems in communicating; they were not able to express their ideas fully in English. In writing, many pupils were not able to write words with the correct spelling or write names of common objects shown in a picture (Acana et al., 2010; Muthwii, 2002). These problems are not only enormous but they threaten the upward mobility of the children in the academic ladder and also the future trends of development in Uganda as a nation.

### **1.7 Education reforms in Uganda**

During the 1960s and 1980s most policy makers concerned with education in developing countries limited their attention to enrolment rates (Katharina, 2001). In Uganda the Castle Education Commission of 1963 which was in operation till 1990 and the Kajubi Commission of 1989 focused on restructuring the education system at all levels, notably the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) (Ndawula, 2009; Katharina & Elly, 2006; Muyanda-Mutebi, 1996). The Kajubi Commission gave rise to the Government White Paper of 1992 which dealt with language policy as well as measures to increase access, improve quality and enhance equity at all levels of the education system (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2001). Over the years, however, it became clear that access to school was not sufficient to ensure a decent level of basic education. Although the gains in enrolment had been impressive in many parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, there was low quality and high drop-out rates leading to many of the children leaving school without having attained a sustainable level of basic reading, writing and numeracy skills (Katharina, 2001). The low level of literacy and numeracy skills prompted the Ministry of Education and Sports in

collaboration with the National Curriculum Development Centre to review the curriculum of the lower primary and to recommend the introduction of the thematic curriculum (NCDC, 2006).

## **1.8 The thematic curriculum**

Uganda has engaged in various curriculum reforms in the post-independence period after 1962, one of them being the thematic curriculum (Altinyelken, 2010). This was a bold step since it required full-scale reorientation of the teacher trainers as well as school administrators and the development of both the curriculum and the support materials, most of which needed to be published in the local languages (USAID/Uganda Report, 2008). One of the objectives of primary education in Uganda is that ‘it should enable individuals to acquire functional literacy, numeracy and communication skills in one Uganda language and English’ (Government White Paper, 1992, 39). In order to implement this objective the Government of Uganda through the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC, 2006) and Ministry of Education and Sports introduced the thematic curriculum in 2007 for the primary schools (Acana et al., 2010; Altinyelken, 2010a). The review of the curricula, proposed changes in the content and organisation of the curricula into themes and emphasised the development of competencies and skills, and introduced continuous assessment (Altinyelken, 2010). The review in the curricular was envisaged to contribute to improving the achievement levels of children in literacy, numeracy and life skills.

The new curriculum for primary education has raised high expectations, because it was recognised that a literate and numerate population is imperative for sustainable development and economic growth in Uganda (Altinyelken, 2010; UNEB,

2011). Moreover, learning cognitive skills, literacy and numeracy skills are considered vital for quality education (Barette et al., 2006).

The thematic curriculum is used for primary one to three classes. It is called Thematic Curriculum because its content is arranged around themes that are familiar to the learners. The recommended MoI is local language for the learners whose first language is not English. English, however, is taught in English and as a strand right from Primary One. Thematic Curriculum is hinged on five pillars namely: 1) the use of themes that interest children, 2) use of local language as a MoI, 3) the class-teacher system, 4) use of non-text book materials and 5) continuous assessment of learners' achievements (NCDC, 2006). The five pillars of the thematic curriculum laid the foundation on which the four articles in this book were developed.

The objective of the thematic curriculum reform was to reduce the primary education curriculum from 10 subjects into a limited numbers of themes. It was hoped that the focus on themes would enable teachers to integrate literacy and numeracy into most lessons and thereby increase children's interest and performance in language and Mathematics (Altinyelken, 2010; USAID/Uganda Report, 2008).

The thematic curriculum stipulates that whenever possible the child should learn in the home language or at least in a language that is familiar to the child. In order to realise the recommendation of the thematic curriculum a number of guidelines were provided; the local language was to become a MoI in the first three grades (P1 – P3) and English was to be treated as a subject; the child-centred learning was to be adopted, and locally-made materials were to be used in the classroom and the assessment was to be continuous. Specifically for continuous assessment, all written tests that were used for

assessment purposes were to be administered in the local language except the assessment in English language competencies. This is because higher achievement levels in literacy are attained when children study in a language in which they already have a strong oral command (NCDC, 2006). Ouane and Glanz (2010, 30) affirm that the use of the mother tongue or a familiar language facilitates the use of effective child-centred teaching practices which encourage learners to be active and become involved with the subject matter. Let us look in depth at the reform within the thematic curriculum namely the guidelines on assessment, local language and local material.

### **1.9 Assessment policy**

The purpose of the assessment is multiple: diagnostic, remedial and it is also a means of evaluating children's competencies in literacy and numeracy on a daily basis since it was assumed that frequent assessment would facilitate appropriate feedback and corrective action on the part of the teacher. For instance, it would enable teachers to identify individual problems and provide adequate help so that the child would improve his/her level of competencies and learn more or less at the same level with the rest of the class. In order to achieve the purpose of the assessment, the teachers were required to assess the pupils on a daily basis during the normal lesson time, and to keep records of assessment of each child, showing the competencies achieved in each lesson. Assessment is to be cumulative meaning that if a child had not achieved a competence in one lesson under a particular theme, the teacher should record the competence when achieved later. The modes of assessing children's competencies under the thematic curriculum are observation and listening to children in class, reviewing children's exercise books and marking their handwriting (NCDC, 2006b, 12). The first cohort of

children on whom the language policy started to be implemented sat for the Primary Leaving Examination in 2013.

Despite the good will of the government of Uganda to embrace thematic curriculum reform, there were a number of constraints that hampered and continue to hamper its successful implementation. The duration of training for head teachers and teachers which was in most cases meant to cover a period of five days, was reduced to three days. This was due to circumstances both at the training centres and in the school and college calendars. The time was too short and inadequate for exposure of the concepts and pedagogical issues in the curriculum. Secondly, there was lack of confidence to face the demand of the implementation of the thematic curriculum. Earlier studies showed that the lack of grounding in the principles of the thematic curriculum which were not taught at the teacher training colleges contributed to the teachers' poor internalisation of the concepts and the implementation of the thematic curriculum in Uganda (Kyeyune, 2012; Ssentanda, 2014).

### **1.10 The research problem**

Education in sub-Saharan Africa is faced with a number of challenges. Historically, the quality of education and the quality of teaching staff has been poor and teachers lack motivation (NCHE, 2006). The lack of motivation of teaching is related to a lack of good learning resources and poor facilities and infrastructures (Materu, 2007; NCHE, 2006). The curricula, both in primary and secondary schools, do not cater for the social and economic needs of the country since they do not adequately equip the individuals to become productive and self-reliant (Materu, 2007; NCHE, 2006, 2005; Aguti, 2002; Katharina, 2002; Nambissan, 1994). In Malawi and Zambia, for example,

the learning and teaching materials are inadequate, enrolment is high leading to congested classes, and there are several book shortages (Williams, 1997).

According to Ahabwe (2011), Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports in 2007, re-introduced mother tongues as the MoI in lower primary school grades (P.1–3). The policy stipulates that schools, save for some in urban areas, should teach all subjects, except English, through mother tongues. Every school adopts the dominant language of the community in which it is situated as a language of instruction or retains English only if the dominant community language is unclear. The multilingual nature of the population, however, has posed a challenge to policy makers when it comes to language of instruction and examination in the primary school (Muthwii, 2002, 4). This challenge emerged because not every child, particularly in the urban areas, is proficient in the selected area languages.

While it is widely recognized amongst language experts and many policy makers that instruction done in local language contribute to learners' attaining proficiency in literacy, encourages children to participate in lessons, and understand content (Akello & Timmerman, 2017; Akello, Timmerman & Namusisi, 2015; Altinyelken, Moorcroft & van der Draai, 2014; Ball, Fekeye & Soyinka, 2009; Akello, 2009; Ndamba, 2008; Spencer & Petty, 2007; Heugh et al., 2007; Owu-Ewie, 2006; Butzkamm, 2003; Ouane & Glanz, 2006; Joseph & Ramani, 1998), findings from other research have shown that literacy in the local language is still inadequate (Acana, 2005; Muthwii, 2002; Ministry of Education and Sports, 2001). The National Assessment of Progress in Education (NAPE) report showed that in 'Reading Comprehension' as well as filling gaps to 'complete a story', pupils in primary three performed poorly. This is because the

children lacked basic comprehension skills. In writing skill, primary three pupils performed relatively well in most of the competences, but experienced much difficulty in ‘naming objects’ selected from their environment (Kyagaba, Opaman, Omala, Jumanyol & Sserunkuma, 2015)

Again Muthwii (2002, 20) emphasised that ‘many children, especially those in monolingual and underprivileged schools, do not know English and many such children experienced problems in communicating; they were not able to express their ideas fully in English’. Aware of the language situation in primary schools in the rural areas, this study therefore set out to establish why children who are taught in the local language find difficulties in reading and writing and to propose ways of addressing the identified challenges.

### **1.11 The Child-centred Pedagogy and Socio-cultural Theory**

Historically, ideas on learner-centred pedagogy date back to the beginning of the twentieth century to Piaget (O’Neill & McMahon, 2005) and to Dewey whose experimental school in the United States (US) was structured around children’s interests (Brodie et al., 2002a) instead of the teacher’s. This shift in power from the expert teacher to the learner was motivated by a need for change in the traditional education environment in which the learners would be passive, apathetic and bored (Makewa& Metto, 2014; Massouleh & Jooneghani, 2012). Simon (1999) noted that in the school system, the concept of child-centred pedagogy has been derived, in particular, from the work of Froebel and the idea that the teacher should not interfere with this process of maturation, but act as a guide, was linked with the process of development or readiness. This meant that each child will learn when he/she is ready.

Child-centred pedagogy has gained prominence in Africa as in other parts of the world (Brodie, Lelliott, & Davis, 2002a; Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008; Mason, 2007). Child-centred practices are promoted in Africa on the principle that they offer an effective remedy to teacher-centred teaching practices, associated with teacher dominance and passive learners, rote learning and the stifling of critical and creative thinking (O'Sullivan, 2004; Rowell, 1995). According to Gravoso, Pasa, Labra & Mori (2008) the teacher-centre approach is characterised by transmission of information and is sadly insufficient to equip students with practical skills.

The paradigm shift away from teaching to an emphasis on learning has encouraged power to be moved from the teacher to the student (Barr and Tagg, 1995). The teacher-centred approach like lecturing is gradually paving way for a widespread growth of the child-centred learning. However, Lea, Stephenson & Troy (2003) maintained that 'many of the institutions or educators claim to be putting child-centred pedagogy into practice, yet in reality they are not.

Child-centred practices aim to overcome authoritarian teaching and learning practices by promoting child's involvement in decision-making processes in classrooms. The focus in child-centred teaching is more on the children and their learning, rather than on the teacher and his or her teaching. Teaching is interactive and is about facilitating children's learning. Children are encouraged to construct their own knowledge and understanding and to strive towards becoming independent learners. A child-centred teacher tries to recognize children's different needs and take these as the starting point, when planning the course (Kember & Kwan, 2002; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001).



Child-centred teachers have been found to use a wider range of teaching methods, than teachers who adopt a teacher-centred approach to teaching (Coffey and Gibbs, 2002). Teachers' approaches to teaching are influenced by their concept of teaching. There are two approaches: teaching as presenting or imparting structured knowledge and teaching as facilitating understanding and bringing about conceptual change and intellectual development (Postareff, Lindblom & Nevgi, 2007). Those who conceive teaching as transmitting knowledge are more likely to adopt a teacher-centred approach, while those who conceive teaching as facilitative, tend to use child-centred approaches (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne & Nevgi, 2007).

Child-centred pedagogy is based on competence models which embrace an emancipatory vision in which learners take control of their own learning: they are active, creative and self-regulating (Muller, 1998; Rowell, 1995; Taylor, 1999). Direct control of the teaching and learning process is considered to 'interfere' with the 'natural' process of learning; therefore a teacher is considered a 'guide' and 'facilitator' and not a 'transmitter' of knowledge (Bernstein, 2000; Taylor, 1999). Unlike teacher-centred practices, learner-centred pedagogies emphasize symmetrical social relations between a teacher and learners as well as among learners themselves (Brodie et al., 2002a).

In order to promote children's deep learning, the child-centred pedagogy promotes assessment. Traditional assessment has focused on testing of memorized facts without deep understanding of the phenomenon. On the contrary, the child-centred approach focuses on assessing the acquisition of higher order thinking processes and competencies. The emphasis is on aligning assessment with instruction and giving children opportunities to receive feedback from their learning. It also involves children

in the learning process and encourages them to be critical (NCDC, 2006; Leahy, Lyon, Thompson & Wiliam, 2005; Biggs, 1999).

Vygotsky advocates for a child-centred approach to teaching/learning and emphasizes that language is the major tool for interaction. He highlights the role of social interaction between the teacher and learner as a tool for transmitting specific knowledge for learning how to construct problem-solving activities (Dorn, 1996). During the class interaction, the teacher offers support to the learner by creating a rich and motivating learning environment in order to guide the learner in the process of constructing knowledge. The learners on their part play active roles in the learning process by sharing experiences, taking part in the group or class discussions. Helot (2000) noted that social interaction is at the core of language use.

In order for Vygotsky to elaborate on the social dimension of learning, he developed the notion of a zone of proximal development (ZPD). He places the interaction with adults and more competent peers at the heart of this zone. He contends that it is in this zone that teachers and more experienced others, through interaction, can lay their hands on the actual learning processes going on in the child's mind. Vygotsky, a social constructivist, captures the core of child-centred approach since he focuses on interaction, teachers support, and role of the learner for the purpose of knowledge construction.

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory guided the classroom observations and the interview sessions which focussed on how the teachers engaged learners in class interaction through cooperative and inquiry learning, and how learners participated in the teaching and learning process. It also guided the investigation on the kind of support

the teachers offer learners in terms of engaging them in challenging tasks. The child-centred approach oriented the study towards a constructivist approach of investigation.

### **1.12 Vygotsky's Socio-cultural theory and African Traditional Education**

Vygotsky's theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978), as he believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of "making meaning. "The socio-cultural theory highlights the role of social interaction between the adult and the child and emphasizes that language is the major tool for interaction. It is during the moments of interaction that learning takes place. In interaction the adult offers support to the learner by creating a rich and motivating learning environment in order to guide the learner in the process of constructing knowledge. The learners on their part share experiences and take active part in the interaction. This theory gives the child freedom to learn at their pace. African Traditional Education does not differ much from the principles of the socio-cultural theory.

African Traditional Education is "the process of cultural transmission and renewal," the process whereby the adult members of a society carefully guide the development of infants and young children, initiating them into the culture of the society (Michael & Augustus, 2002). Just like the socio-cultural theory, in the training or upbringing of children, a measure of freedom is allowed so that they can have the opportunity of learning at their own rate and behaving in their own particular ways, provided their learning processes and general behaviour do not present a wide departure from the accepted social standards and conventions of their society. Freedom is therefore a relative term and the extent of freedom a person enjoys depends largely on

the culture of the society to which he or she belongs and the values which that society upholds. Omolewa (2007) contends that under the traditional system of education, each person in the community is practically trained and prepared for his/her role in society. It is a holistic system, in which storytelling, proverbs and myths also play an important role in the teaching and learning process. The use of stories, proverbs and myths in the learning process is in line with the principles of the Child-centred pedagogy in which learning is structured around children's interests (Brodie et al., 2002a) instead of the teacher's.

Comparing the socio-cultural theory to the African Traditional Education, it is evident that they have a number of commonalities regarding the approaches to learning or child formation: In both cases the adults, the more knowledgeable one shares knowledge with the children; learning takes place during moments of interaction; learning is to be structured around children's interests instead of the adult or the more knowledgeable one; and the children have the freedom to learn at their own pace. We can then conclude that there are good elements within the African Traditional Education that are applicable in the classroom today and they should be upheld.

### **1.13 Research questions**

The study set out to answer four research questions. The questions have been addressed through four sub-studies within a participatory action research framework. The first research question provided a wide overview of the challenges the children and teachers face in using the local languages as MoI for teaching reading and writing. The outcome of the first sub-study was presented to the research team during a one day feedback workshop. Through reflections and discussions of the findings from the

preliminary studies, challenge of using teacher-centred approach featured more prominently than the other challenges. In a bid to address the challenges of the teacher-centred approach, the participants proposed the adoption of the child-centred pedagogy. This proposal justified the second research question which focussed on how the child-centred pedagogy can be implemented for teaching reading and writing in the local language. The child-centred pedagogy was implemented for three months and evaluated to assess its impact on children's learning to read and writing in local language. The outcome of the evaluation was shared with the research team during another one day feedback workshop. Two major challenges emerged namely: assessing children in large classes and the lack of instructional materials, specifically the reading text. These two challenges were addressed through research questions three and four respectively. These therefore are the research questions that guided the study:

- a.** Why do children who are taught in the local language find difficulties in reading and writing in the local language?
- b.** How can the child-centred pedagogy be adopted for teaching in order to facilitate children's learning to read and write in the local language?
- c.** How can formative assessment be implemented in large classes as a means of helping children attain competency in reading and writing in the local language?
- d.** How can written children's story facilitate children's learning to read and write in the local language?

The responses to the research questions above are presented in four articles in the subsequent chapters of this book.

## **1.14 Methodology of the study**

This study was conducted within the Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework. PAR seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it. At its heart is collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves. The reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture, and local context and embedded in social relationships. The process of PAR should be empowering and lead to people having increased control over their lives (Baum, MacDougall & Smith, 2006)

The thesis consists of four main sub-studies that are closely linked to each other and yet each study has its own methodology clearly spelt out. The study adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology right from the stages of identifying the problem through to evaluating the study and re-planning for the next phases of each study. The choice of PAR was to help teachers of literacy from primary one to three and teachers of English in primary four not only to research into their own practice in order to understand and improve it (Diana & Steve, 2005), but also to engage in collaborative research with other teachers and other participants from inside and outside their school. Through PAR teachers reflected and shared their experience of implementing the proposed innovations in four sub-studies in the lower primary classes with the hope of improving children's reading and writing in the local language. The four sub-studies are closely linked and they demonstrate the cyclical nature of participatory action research.

The participants of this study were teachers of literacy from primary one to three and teachers of English in primary four, the District Inspectors of Schools (DISs),

Head-teachers, Deputy Head-teachers, Centre Coordinating Tutors (CCT) and pupils of primary one to four. Initially the participants were selected from six primary schools but later for the main study they were from three primary schools in the districts of Gulu and Amuru. The tutors from the Primary Teachers' college and members of the Acholi Language Board too participated in the study as experts from the Training colleges and as legal body responsible for promoting the development of local languages orthography, study materials and recommending the appropriate dialects to be used in each locality within the Acholi sub-region.

These participants provided preliminary data that highlighted the language situation on the ground and the data formed the foundation for designing the subsequent studies. For the actual study, nine teachers of literacy in primary one to three, three teachers of English in primary four and all the pupils of primary one to four participated in the first year. As the pupils were promoted to the next classes, their number reduced because we did not take in the new entrants in primary one and did not focus on those promoted to primary five. This was intended to help the participants track the progress of learning reading and writing in the selected cohort of pupils. There was a feedback team consisting of District Inspector of Schools, a head-teacher, CCT, a primary school teacher, a tutor and a representative of the parents. This team played the roles of 'critical friends' through offering guidance, suggestions, advice and support during the research process (David, Tak-Shing, Bick-Har, April, Sandra, NG, Louisa & Jessie, 1997).

The methodology is divided into three phases: the pre-intervention, during intervention and post intervention phase. The pre-intervention phase consisted of a

number of activities such as identifying the schools, sharing the research interests and recruiting participants. This was followed by preliminary data collection in order to establish why children who are being taught in the local language had difficulties in reading and writing. The outcome from the preliminary study was shared with the participants during a one day feedback workshop as means of validating the findings in participatory action research process. From the feedback workshop, it emerged that the teachers lacked skills in implementing the child-centred pedagogy (Akello & Timmerman, 2017). This necessitated the training of the teachers in order to equip them with skills for implementing the child-centred pedagogy in the teaching reading and writing.

The intervention phase consisted of three sub-studies each of them arising from the recommendation made in an earlier study. The first intervention was the implementation of the Child-centred pedagogy (CCP) for teaching reading and writing in local language. Each of the sub-studies went through a five phased cycle of participatory action research. These were identifying the challenge and analysing them, planning for implementation of intervention, implementing the intervention, monitoring and evaluation in order to establish the effectiveness of the intervention and then again planning for the next cycle of study. The data obtained through interviews, class observation, review of exercise books were presented to the participants during a workshop session for purposes of validating findings and identifying loop-holes and finally proposing an intervention to be implemented in the next cycle of the study.

The schools and the participants were purposively selected. The schools involved in the study used local language as MoI from primary one to three and



transition to English as MoI in primary four. The teachers were those who have used local language and English as MoI from 2009. The three years of uninterrupted experience was considered as providing adequate exposure to the language situation in the lower primary classes.

### **1.13 The structure of the thesis**

The thesis begins with an introductory chapter to the entire study and is followed by a paper on the preliminary study in chapter 2 that was intended to establish why children who were taught in the local language had difficulties in reading and writing. The preliminary study recommended and re-emphasised the adoption of the Child-centred pedagogy (CCP) as the innovation instead of the teacher-centred approach. Adopting the child-centred pedagogy entailed incorporating instructional materials, conducting continuous assessment, giving feedback on work done and recording pupils' competencies attained in reading and writing. Chapter 3 presents a paper on how the child-centred pedagogy was adopted for teaching reading and writing within a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework. Chapter 4 reports on the implementation of formative assessment in large classes as a second innovation within the bigger study for the purpose of improving children's reading and writing in the local language. The need to implement formative assessment in large classes was prompted by the recommendation in chapter 3. Chapter 5 presents the third innovation of written children's stories to be used as instructional materials in lower primary classes with the aim of improving children's reading and writing. Finally chapter 6 covers the summary, general discussion, recommendations and implication of the study for the various stakeholders in education.

Everyone is entitled to receive an education in the language proper to the territory where he/she resides.

Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights

Section II Education, Article 29