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

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Akello, L. D. (2018). *Adopting the child-centred pedagogy for teaching reading and writing in Local Language: Experiences from Uganda*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen.

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Chapter 6

General discussion

6.1. Introduction

After a short introduction into the key issues of this study, chapter six focuses on the summary of the major findings that emerged from the four sub-studies relating to children's learning to read and write in the local language. This is followed by reflections and recommendations, implications of the study and finally, proposals on areas for further research.

As highlighted in the general introduction (chapter 1), early education in linguistically diverse countries are of low quality (Singh, 2014 & Abijo, 2014) yet education is the gateway to development (Riddell, 2006; UNESCO, 2003 & Aref, 2011). The low quality of education is attributed to language since language is a fundamental medium of effective communication in educational processes (Tembe and Norton. 2011; Webb, et al., 2004). This is because through language innovative ideas, skills and knowledge are constructed, shared and transmitted from one person to another (Ouane, 2003). The language used could be mother tongue (MT) or first language (L₁) or foreign or all, although of recent there is a shift towards using the mother tongues or language(s) that the learner is familiar with as MoI for the first three to four years of formal education in primary schools in the rural areas (Clegg & Afitska, 2011; Ouane & Glanz, 2010; Alidou, Broke-Utne, Santana, Heugh & Wolff, 2006). Mother tongue is the language of immediate environment and daily interaction which 'nurture' the child in the first four years of life (Ouane and Glanz, 2010) as he/she gets to communicate verbally (NCDC, 2008). The mother tongue is closely linked to the child's growth and development and it is learnt naturally through imitating sounds from their immediate

environment. However, children get influenced by a language spoken in the community where they live and play.

Due to the importance of language in the education processes, several countries in sub-Saharan Africa adopted different modes of delivery toward medium of instruction. For example, there are countries that have adopted the bilingual mode (Ogechi, 2003; Muthwii, 2002; Bunyi, 2001; Acana, et al., 2010, 2005; Ahabwe, 2011; Draku, 2011; Akello, 2009; Muthwii, 2002; and MoES, 2001); while others have focussed on the monolingual mode (Trudell, 2007; Heugh, et al., 2007); and other still have preferred the multilingual mode (Nel and Muller, 2010; Joseph & Ramani, 1998; Fakeye & Soyinka, 2009; Adebayo, 2008). 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.

The government of Uganda in support of the local language as medium of instruction introduced a number of interventions. First, the language policy as one of the measures to increase access, improve quality and enhance equity at all levels of 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. There was high drop-out rates and low level of literacy and numeracy skills (Katharina, 2001). This low level of education prompted the Ministry of Education and Sports in collaboration with the NCDC to review the curriculum of the lower primary and to recommend the introduction of the thematic curriculum in 2007 in primary schools (Altinyelken, 2010; Acana, et al., 2010; NCDC, 2008; NCDC, 2006).

The reviewed curricula proposed changes in the content and organisation of the curricula into themes and emphasised the use of home language or at least a language that is familiar to the child for instruction, the development of competencies and skills, and introduced continuous assessment (Altinyelken, 2010a). 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 (Ouane and Glanz, 2010, 30).

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 new curriculum raised high expectations, because it was recognised that a literate and numerate population is imperative for quality education (Barette et al., 2006), sustainable development and economic growth in Uganda (Altinyelken, 2010; UNEB, 2011).

6.2. Methodology of the study

The study adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology. 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 thesis consists of four main sub-studies that are closely linked to each other and they demonstrate the cyclical nature of participatory action research and yet each study has its own methodology clearly spelt out. The participants 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. 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 a 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. There was a feedback team that played the roles of 'critical friends' through offering guidance, suggestions, advice and support during the research process (David, et al., 1997).

The aims of the study were fourfold: first to explore why children who are taught in the local language find difficulties in reading and writing in the local language; secondly to investigate how the child-centred pedagogy can be adopted for teaching reading and writing in the local language, thirdly to examine how formative assessment can be implemented in large classes as a means of helping children attain competencies in reading and writing in the local language and finally, to establish how children's written stories can facilitate children's learning to read and write in the local language.

6.3. Major findings

6.3.1. Experiences of teachers and children in using local language as medium of instruction

The preliminary study was undertaken in order to establish why children who were taught in the local language had challenges in reading and writing in the local language. The study was conducted in six primary schools in Northern Uganda and the main participants were teachers of local language from primary one to three; and of English in primary four. Other participants were pupils from primary one to four, the head-teachers, deputy head-teachers, centre coordinating tutors and the District inspector of Schools. The findings through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, lessons observations and review of children's exercise books, highlighted a number of issues that helped in gaining insight into the challenges of using local language as MoI and guided in proposing ways of improving children's competencies in reading and writing.

In particular the research team identified ten major challenges affecting the implementation of the local language as a MoI namely: lack of instructional materials, use of teacher-centred approaches, low teachers' language proficiency, children's preferences of English vis-a-vis the local language as is stipulated in the language policy, difficulties of assessing learning in large classes, inadequate administrative support, high teacher: pupil ratio, children's admission into the school, minimal parental support into the child's learning and inadequate teacher preparation. Key among them is the use of teacher-centred approach for teaching reading and writing in the local language as opposed to the child-centred pedagogy.

Most challenges summarised above are pedagogical in nature; while others pertained to the school administrators who oversee the implementation of the language policy and at the same time provide materials for preparing instructional materials and also carry out support supervision to the teachers. These challenges, especially the teacher-centred approach, have affected the implementation of the local language as medium of instruction in rural primary schools. Aware of the importance of using a local language in children's literacy development, the participants collaboratively during a one day feedback workshop proposed the use of child centred pedagogy for teaching reading and writing.

6.3.2 Teaching reading and writing using the child-centred pedagogy

The second sub-study aimed at establishing how the child-centred pedagogy can be adopted for teaching reading and writing in order to facilitate children's learning in the local language. The child-centred pedagogy as an intervention was implemented within a Participatory Action Research framework. The key findings are reflected under two sub-themes, namely: the teachers experiences of using the child-centred pedagogy and children's learning to read and write in the local language. The adoption of the child-centred pedagogy brought about positive change in teachers' attitude on the use of local language as a MoI. The teachers enjoyed the lessons and realised that in order for learning to take place, they need to prepare adequately and involve children in a number of learning activities. These positive experiences were not free of problems. Soon, two main challenges emerged: the lack of instructional materials especially reading texts and the difficulty of assessing children daily in large classes. The teachers realised that in order for the children to learn reading and writing, they need reading text that would act

as models to reinforce the teaching. The reading materials were not available and even schools that had the reading materials; one book was shared by ten children. The lack of instructional material is a long standing challenge (UNESCO, 2008a; Heugh & Mathias, 2014 & Oketcho, 2014) and this has greatly affected children's learning to read and write in the local language.

The second thematic area of the study was on children's learning to read and write in the local language. Findings through lesson/class observation showed that pupils enjoyed the lessons and participated actively. The participation was manifested in arrays of activities such as: show of hands to respond to a question or listening to another pupil respond to a question. Other pupils moved willingly to pick picture cards to read and match them with writings on the chalkboard. Some of the children engaged in reading individually, though a few of them were hesitant in reading and some of them individually pointed at a word but articulated another word that they had heard being read earlier. While some pupils murmured in disapproval of their weaker peers, the teachers on the contrary offered support by encouraging the pupils to point at each syllable as they read. The more competent pupils prompted the less proficient pupils in reading by whispering from the background and also smiling or nodding in approval of the correct answers. The teachers' and pupils' reaction to the less competent pupils are in line with Vygotsky's principles of the zone of proximal development, in which the more competent adult or peers offers support to the less competent peers in order to help them learn and move to the next level of development.

The implementation of the child-centred pedagogy within a Participatory Action Research framework helped to promote incidental learning. For example, in classes

where pictures and written stories were displayed, pupils took turns in reading to each other and also in helping those who had difficulties in reading. The fact that the pupils took initiative to read and learn from the instructional materials displayed in their classes emphasises the importance of continuous development and use of instructional materials to promote active learning, incidental learning and continuous generation of knowledge.

6.3.3. Assessing reading and writing daily in large classes

The third sub-study was intended to establish how formative assessment can be implemented in large classes as a means of helping children attain competency in reading and writing in the local language. The study looked at the teachers' practices of assessment in the ordinary learning environment and its challenges, and assessment within a Participatory Action Research framework as an intervention. Before the intervention, teachers assessed children's competencies in reading and writing at the end-of-theme and at the end-of-term. They, however, did not assess competencies on daily basis since they considered it not practical in large classes. The assessment of competencies was not accompanied by written comments specifying the areas of strengths and weaknesses. These omissions of written comments did not only make it hard for the teachers to identify specific areas in which pupils had attained competencies and in which areas they needed help but also made it hard to plan for improvement of teaching reading and writing.

The study also revealed a number of challenges that contributed to the difficulty of assessing children's reading and writing. Among them were the high number of pupils in a class and additional responsibilities that the teachers held in the school. These

challenges resulted into increased teachers' workload which in turn led to other challenges such as the delay in marking the books and difficulties of giving feedback immediately. The lack of feedback and the records on competencies gained is a practice contrary to the guidelines stipulated in the assessment policy (NCDC, 2006). A number of scholars, however, argue that useful feedback should be prompt and timely in order to ensure that important elements were not forgotten (Clynes & Raftery, 2008; Walker, 2009; Rust, 2002). Additionally, other studies contend that verbal interaction with the pupils over their written exercises facilitate them in understanding their weaknesses and encourage them to reflect and correct their work (NCDC, 2006; Leahy, Lyon, Thompson & Wiliam, 2005). Swarffield (2011) further argue that the feedback provided to the pupils should highlight quality in their work, point out where the work would be improved and give clear and explicit guidance on how to make the improvement.

Aware of the challenges of assessing pupils daily, the teachers and pupils engaged in a Participatory Action Research as a means of improving the assessment practices and consequently children's learning. Assessment within the Participatory Action Research framework focused on assessment practices of six teachers at different levels and was guided by a re-designed assessment plan. Pupils' competencies were assessed in reading at three levels: as a whole class, at group levels, and individually. The outcome of pupils' assessment necessitated the teachers to plan for continued assessment at group levels and in giving feedback immediately.

6.3.4 Using children's stories for teaching reading and writing

The fourth sub-study was intended to establish how the written stories contributed to children's learning to read and write in the local language. The use of the

written stories in the classroom yielded some positive outcomes for both the children and teachers. Some children were able to read and write for a number of reasons: they could see how the words were written while others could hear their teachers and peers articulating the sounds. Others learned by looking at illustrations. This is because pictures or illustrations introduce and explain the world to children in a comprehensive way even before they are able to read and it allows the children to get accustomed to new words and build up their vocabulary through both verbal and visual references provided by the book (Hladikova, 2014). In addition, picture books and their illustration ‘can hook children into a lifelong love of reading’, a practice that leads to broadening their knowledge and enabling children to better understand themselves and their integration within society (Reading Is Fundamental, 2010). In fact, teachers observed that children who were less active during the class time were more active during the storytelling time and during moments of drawing illustrations; an indication that they had understood the stories and were able to translate them into drawings. Some children’s desire and demand for reading increased and this demonstrated that learners can be more interested in reading if they have a variety of texts that they can use (Berardo, 2006); a practice that is essential for their development and their ability to perform well both in school and later in life (Hladikova, 2014).

Carter (2003) noted that the teachers’ approach to using the written stories suggests that providing opportunities for children to listen to stories read to them, or for them to read to the teacher, and reading individually and in groups, will encourage progress in literacy, and stimulate an interest in learning the language at school. He adds that reading aloud helps to familiarise children with the language of books and

patterns and fosters listening habits and provides a model for children to emulate. Other scholars emphasised that repeated reading and paired reading are examples of activities that promote fluency in reading (Pang, Muaka, Bernhardt & Kamil, 2003) and enable children to identify words, and to read on their own (Carter, 2003).

While it was noted that the written stories contributed to children's learning to read and write in the local language, a number of challenges emerged: it was hard to

- sustain children's interest during the story writing process especially when they were expected to write words that they did not know the spellings;
- illustrate concepts that they were not able to mentally visualise and translate the stories written in Acoli to English;
- write or translate the 'animal talk' in the stories. This brings in the question, to what extent can children be involved in a study especially when they are expected to play active roles in terms of writing, drawing/illustrating the concepts and translating the story?
- maintain the humour, gestures, expressions, tone-variations- that were vivid in the oral versions of the stories. The question then is how can those features be maintained in the stories to give it flavour? Perhaps the stories could be accompanied by audio-visuals.

6.4 Reflections and recommendations

This study is based on case studies in primary schools in Northern Uganda. The major purpose of the study was to gain insight into the challenges of using local language as medium of instruction for teaching reading and writing. This was with the intention of proposing interventions that could possibly offer solutions to the emerging

challenges and improve children's learning to read and writing in the local language. Drawing from the case studies and experiences gained in implementing the intervention, we can pick some lessons that are significant in enhancing children's skills in learning reading and writing in the local language. The learnt lessons are presented under four thematic areas, namely: pedagogical challenges, policy and practice, engagement in participatory action research and adoption of intervention.

6.4.1. Pedagogical challenges

In sub-Saharan Africa, there are between 1,250 and 2,100 languages of different status. In spite of the numerous languages, many African countries, Uganda inclusive, still use the colonial (Government White Paper, 1992; Muthwii, 2002; Owu-Ewie, 2006; Adebayo, 2008; Fakeye & Soyinka, 2009) or second language as the MoI at different levels of learning (Ouane, 2003). The challenge with those languages is that neither the teacher understands it well enough in order to use it as medium of instruction nor the learner is proficient in it. For lack of teacher's pedagogical skills and negative attitude towards the use of local language as medium of instruction, children were not able to read and write in the local language. This means that many children left school without the foundational literacy skills (Acana et al, 2010).

The language challenges have prompted a number of countries to shift towards using local language as MoI alongside a second language, either French or English or Portuguese or Afrikaans (Akello, 2009; Acana et al. 2010; Ngwaru & Opoku-Amankwa, 2010; Ahabwe 2011; Draku, 2011). This shift is in line with Ouane and Glanz's (2010, 30) affirmation that the use of the local language facilitates the use of effective, child-centred teaching practices which encourage learners to be active and become involved

with the subject matter. Consequently for Uganda to effectively promote the use of local language as medium of instruction and for children to learn reading and writing, the Teacher Training Colleges need to incorporate the child-centred pedagogy in the training programmes of teachers. In addition there is need for support supervision and ongoing professional development through workshops and seminars at schools and district levels.

6.4.2. Policy and practice

Three sub-studies documented policy guidelines on the implementation of the Child-centred pedagogy; namely the presentation of concepts in themes that the child is familiar with, using local language as MoI, daily assessment, keeping records of competencies gained daily, and use of instructional materials (NCDC, 2006; Altinyelken, 2010). As teachers presented the different themes, children on their part actively interacted with each other in the learning process (Muller, 1998; Rowell, 1995; Taylor, 1999). The active participation and interaction resulted into gradual improvement in children's competencies in reading and writing. The improvement in competencies is a confirmation of the principles of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory in which he contends that interaction between the adult (teacher) and the child and between more competent child and less competent peers are forms of support that facilitates children's learning. Though it seemed children were learning, the large number of children in a class made it challenging for the teachers to establish the particular competencies that each child had attained. The large number of children had far reaching effects on the implementation of the child-centred pedagogy.

The use of written stories for teaching children's reading and writing also yielded some positive impact. The outcome showed that the written stories aided the majority of the children to learn reading and writing. This was made possible because the children could see the letters, words and the sentences that they could learn from. Secondly the illustrations played a great role in helping the beginners in reading and writing, since they could interpret the illustrations and try to explain what they entailed. On the whole, children developed interest in reading and writing and their proficiency in reading and writing improved.

Participation as a key component of the child-centred pedagogy in the teaching and learning process is very important if meaningful learning is to take place. This participation is at different levels; the participation of teacher and pupils, that at the level of children and peers; and the one among teachers and teachers. The bottom line in all these levels of participation is that the children learn from the teachers and their peers and they are able to improve their skills and competencies in the learning process and be able to accomplish tasks that are set before them. It should however be noted that even if participation result in learning, the learning is specific to the individual and the pace and level of learning varies from one learner to another. Therefore in order for learners to participate in the learning process, there is need to take care of the individual interest, to bring activities that link previous learning to the new one and the learning activities need to add value to the learners' life.

Participation, however, does not happen automatically. There are a number of issues that needs to be paid attention to in order for participation to yield the desired outcome. These are the number of children in a class, the disposition of the teachers and

learners, the learners' and teachers' background, the learning activities and the resources and the teachers' creativity and abilities to motivate learners into participating in the teaching and learning environment. When there are many children in a class, they still participate but the more vocal and active learners dominate the class leaving out the quiet and inactive learners. This creates the false impression that learning is taking place and yet only a small numbers will have benefited. In order for children to benefit from participating in the learning environment, they need to be put in groups. This will give room for the teachers not only to identify their strengths and weaknesses and provide support immediately, but also for their more competent peers to support them.

Additionally, the activities need to be of interest to the learners and have a link between the concepts learnt before either from home or at school and they must find value in the learning activity. In this way participation becomes self-initiated and can be prolonged and sustained over a period of time. On the other hand when the learners don't have interest in the learning activities and do not find value it them, the learning process become stressing and in most cases they are not sustainable. There is need therefore for the teachers and parents to engage in planning activities and setting environment that are not only attractive but also that captures the interest to the learners both in homes and in the schools.

6.4.3. Engagement in Participatory Action Research

The change and improvement in challenges affecting the teaching reading and writing in large classes has been made possible due to the teachers' participation in PAR and adoption the principles of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory. Through PAR framework the teachers worked collaboratively in identifying the challenges in their

teaching practices and in pupils' learning to read and write; and devised better ways of assessing at group levels. This was further strengthened by adopting Vygotsky's Zone of proximal development that offered the teachers space to work in collaboration with each other to support children's learning. Working in collaborations, the teachers offered support to the pupils and the pupils who were more competent in reading and writing guided their peers who were weaker.

The implementation of CCP within the PAR has yielded some positive changes in the children's learning to read and write and a change in the teachers' attitude to teaching in the local language and developing instructional materials. The study acknowledged that in order for the positive trends to continue, there is need for continuous professional development for the teacher who is at the centre of the implementation of CCP. This is because teachers' mastery of CCP is one determining factor, among others, in helping children improve their level of proficiency in reading and writing in local language.

Teachers' participation in action research has changed assessment practices in large classes and promoted pupils' learning to read and write. In line with the assessment policy, the teachers worked in collaboration with each other, shared the strengths and weakness in their assessment practices and gradually changed from end-of-theme and end-of-term assessment to daily assessment in small groups. Much as there was improvement in assessment practices and in pupils' learning, large classes and increased teachers' workload in terms of planning to teach, marking books, giving feedback and planning remedial classes, are threats to the practice of daily assessment.

In spite of that, assessment in small groups has made it possible for the teachers focus on individual pupil and to give both written and verbal feedback them immediate.

The involvement of teachers and children in the story writing process within a participatory action research process was a worthwhile choice that has contributed greatly not only into changing the teachers' mind-set from not wanting to write reading materials to actually writing stories with children but also into improving children's learning to read and write. It is therefore important to involve teachers in evaluative and collaborative studies so that they can work towards minimising challenges that affect their teaching practices and improve children's learning.

Collaboration as a key aspect of Participatory Action Research is a theme that ran through the study from the initial stage of problem identification and analysis, planning for implementation and monitoring of the interventions, evaluation of the intervention and re-planning for another phase of implementation. This process of collaboration in order to reach a decision and accomplish an agreed upon task however calls for high level of understanding and team work. There are a number of group dynamics such as a conducive conversational space, the divergent viewpoints, the level of experiences and knowledge on the issue of discussion of the collaborators and the disposition of the participants to cause change. For example, creating a conversational space has to be cultivated over a period of time in order for the participants to open up and participate constructively in the decision making.

6.4.4. Adoption of intervention

The fourth aspect that emerged in the study is that of introducing an intervention in order to address a challenge that is affecting children's learning. It is not enough to

introduce an intervention in an existing system and expect that the implementers will embrace and implement it successfully. A number of issues need to be taken care of, namely: the duration of preparation, the attitude of the implementers, planning and availing the support systems both from within the school setting and from the external. The duration of preparation of the implementers in order to implement the intervention successfully is very important. This is because the implementers need ample time to learn and internalise the intervention in order to translate it into action in the learning environment. It cannot be taken for granted that after a one-off training, the implementers have grasped the mechanisms ingrained in the intervention and can implement it successfully. Learning takes place gradually and in phases and it needs to be re-enforced frequently. This means that when an intervention is introduced, there is need to prepare the implementers through training over a period of time and to make periodic evaluation and re-planning in order to address the challenges that emerge during the implementation of the intervention. Such challenges can be addressed through offering support supervision regularly and conducting short courses, holding workshops and seminars.

The attitudes of the implementers too, determine whether or not the intervention will be successful. Negative attitude towards the intervention leads to the failure of the intervention whereas when the implementers have a positive attitude, they try their level best to see to it that the intervention is implemented successfully. It is therefore important to work on the attitude of the implementers through training workshops and continued sensitization. Once they realise the importance of the intervention, then it becomes easier to work towards implementing it well.

Intervening in a learning situation is a brilliant idea, the challenge however is that most interventions are introduced without putting the necessary support systems in place. Without support systems in place even when the preparation in terms of training has taken place, not much can be done. The support systems can be as simple as peer support, though there is need for support supervision and mentoring by the immediate supervisor or the more competent peer.

In a nutshell therefore, for effective implementation of the child-centred pedagogy for teaching reading and writing, there is need for a concerted effort from all stakeholders in education. Working within PAR framework and adopting Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, are enabling factors that would promote collaboration among the teachers and children in a bid to improve learning and the teaching practices.

6.5 Areas for further studies

The study has contributed to the field of literacy development in Uganda through adopting the child-centred pedagogy (CCP). In the first sub-study, a series of challenges influencing the implementation of the local language as a medium of instruction emerged. However, this study has tried to address only three of the challenges namely: teacher-centred approach of teaching, daily assessment in large classes and the lack of reading materials for children. Other challenges like the lack of administrative support into children's literacy development and the role of the parents in supporting children's literacy development were not the focus of the study. Aware that parents are the first teachers of the children and that the learning at home reinforces the learning in school; it is therefore important to investigate the parental contribution to children's literacy development both in homes and in schools within a participatory action research framework.

This study focussed on primary schools in rural areas where there was high pupil number ranging from 90 to 140. These high numbers contributed to high teacher workload thus affecting their work efficiency. It would be of interest to extend such a study to schools where the number of pupils ranges between 40 to 60 pupils per class and where teachers have a relatively low workload.

The study has indicated that teacher's preparation is important for the implementation of interventions and policies in education. It would be of interest to investigate into how teachers' preparation at the different levels of education and also within the schools contributes to children's literacy development.

Lastly, the study adopted the child-centred pedagogy for teaching reading and writing in local language. The challenge however that is since the intervention was introduced in Uganda in 2007, there has been negative reactions from the teachers who are at the centre of implementing the intervention. There is need to explore how best interventions can be introduced and implemented effectively.