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

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Summary

Among the many challenges that have affected children's education in sub-Saharan Africa is the multilingual nature of the population that has made it hard for policy makers to select an area language as MoI and examination. Uganda as a growing nation is faced with the same challenge especially in the lower primary classes because not every child, particularly in the urban areas, is proficient in the selected area languages. In a bid to address the language in education issues several countries in sub-Saharan Africa including Uganda introduced a number of reforms. Uganda in particular developed the language policy in 1992 and introduced the Thematic Curriculum in 2007. Other reforms were the formation of language boards, promotion of language writers, formation of translation groups, development of curricular, training of teachers, development of orthographies and instructional materials. In spite of the many reforms, findings from researches elsewhere and in Uganda show that literacy in the local language is still inadequate. This study was therefore set to establish why children who are taught in the local language find difficulties in reading and writing with the aim of proposing way of addressing the identified challenges.

The following specific research questions guided the four sub-studies:

- i. Why do children who are taught in the local language find difficulties in reading and writing in the local language?
- ii. 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?
- iii. 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?

- iv. What roles do the written children's stories play in helping children learn reading and writing in the local language?

The theoretical framework of this study builds on aspects of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Vygotsky advocates for a child-centred approach to teaching and 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. 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 and taking part in the group or class discussions. Vygotsky, a social constructivist, captures the core of child-centred approach since he focuses on interaction, teachers support, and role of the learners in their own learning and in the learning of their peers.

The study adopted a participatory action research (PAR) methodology. The methodology is divided into three phases: the pre-intervention, during intervention and post intervention. The pre-intervention phase mainly consisted of identifying the schools, sharing the research interests and recruiting participants. The intervention phase consisted of four sub-studies and the first one aimed at establishing why children who are being taught in the local language had difficulties in reading and writing. This was followed by three other studies, each of them arising from the recommendation made in an earlier study. Each of the sub-studies went through a five phased cycle of participatory action research, namely identifying the challenges and analysing them,

planning for implementation of intervention, implementing the intervention, monitoring and evaluation and planning for the next cycle of study.

The choice of PAR helped teachers not only to do research into their own teaching practice in order to understand and improve it, 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 sub-studies with the hope of improving children's reading and writing in the local language. The sub-studies are closely linked and they demonstrate the cyclical nature of participatory action research.

The findings from the first study exposed a number of challenges that were affecting the successful use of the local language as MoI. The challenges ranged from lack of translated curriculum from English to the local language to varied language preferences of the stakeholders in education and lack of instructional materials, especially written stories that could reinforce children's learning to read and write in the local language. Other challenges were teachers' poor language proficiency, use of teacher-centred methodology and inappropriate assessment practices, the lack of administrative support, high teacher: pupil ratio, inappropriate admission criteria, and inadequate contribution of the parents into their children's learning and poor teacher preparation to implement the curriculum. Through reflections and discussion on the findings during a feedback meeting session, the participants identified the use of teacher-centred methodology as the major challenge to the successful implementation of the local language policy. They therefore in collaboration with one another recommended the adoption of the Child-centred pedagogy as an intervention.

The outcome of implementing the child-centred pedagogy revealed that involving children in the learning process at individual and group levels, conducting continuous assessment and using appropriate instructional materials facilitated children's learning and improved their proficiency in reading and writing. Nevertheless, it was noted that some pupils still find difficulties in reading three syllable words, constructing simple sentences and punctuating their work. In order to improve children's proficiency in reading and writing in local language, the teachers were encouraged to use more instructional materials, carry out continuous assessment in small groups and design learning activities that promote children's interaction and participation. It was further recommended that in order for the teachers to successfully implement the child-centred pedagogy, they need support supervision and regular training.

Based on the recommendation from the first and second studies, third intervention study on assessment in large classes was carried out. The findings showed that teachers preferred end-of-theme and end-of-term assessment and hardly conducted daily assessment. The challenge in daily assessment was due to the high number of pupils, ranging from 100 – 120 per class and also other school duties that the teachers had to attend to in addition to marking books and giving feedback to pupils on their reading and writing.

The result of the third study also revealed that teachers' involvement in Participatory Action Research (PAR) brought in a positive change in attitude towards assessing children's competencies in reading and writing. Through participation in PAR teachers were able to discuss, share experiences and reflect more on their assessment

practices and work in collaboration with other teachers in the research team to devise better means of managing children's assessment in reading and writing. The study recommended that in order to promote effective assessment, the teachers need to reflect more on their teaching practices and children's learning and to work in collaboration with their peers in carrying out daily assessment and giving feedback immediately.

Findings from the fourth study revealed that written stories contributed to improving children writing and reading since they learn how letters are shaped, words are spelt and articulated. Through the written stories moral values are inculcated in the children. Although the illustrations in the stories helped the children to understand the stories, it was noted that those in grades one and two had challenges in reading three syllable words. Secondly the written stories lacked the 'animal language', the humour, gesture and voice variations that were prominent in the oral stories and that affected the beauty and meaning that came with them. While the study recommended the continued use of written children stories for reinforcing reading and writing, it proposed that the stories be accompanied with audio-visuals in order to maintain the humour, tone variations and 'animal language'.

Based on the findings, our major recommendations are:

- For teachers to identify the challenges that affect their teaching practices and children's learning and work towards improving them, they need to work in collaboration with each other within a participatory action research (PAR) framework. PAR gives them the space for discussion, inquiry, reflection and collaborative decision making in order to come up with practical solutions to the challenges in their teaching practices. In addition involvement in PAR offers the

teachers chances to learn best practices through sharing teaching and learning experiences.

- In order to implement the child-centred pedagogy effectively, there is need to train teachers who are the main implementers of the intervention to design and use appropriate instructional materials, to carry out assessment daily and record competencies gained, to give meaningful feedback to the children immediately and conduct remedial in areas of low competencies. Implementing child-centred pedagogy is demanding and so the teachers need to have mastery of the contents of the subject to be taught. There is also need to reduce the number of children in each class in order to reduce the teachers' workload.
- Effective children's learning takes place through interaction between competent adult and children and between children and their peers. The teachers therefore need to thoughtfully plan activities and create a learning environment that does not only promote interaction between the teacher and learners and among the learners but also offer possibilities for incidental learning.
- For the teachers to successfully implement the child-centred pedagogy as an intervention there is need for the Schools Administration, Centred Coordination Tutors and District Education Officials to regularly train the teachers in order to address the skills gaps. Secondly there is need for continuously support supervision and peer supervision as means of reinforcing the teaching skills. The training in implementing the child-centred pedagogy needs to be part of the teachers' training right from the training colleges. Without these support measures in operation, the teachers easily revert to the teacher-centred approach

of teaching that denies the learners chances of participating in knowledge creation.

- Daily assessment and giving immediate feedback on learning is feasible ordinarily in classes ranging between 50 - 60 pupils and when the teachers' workload is reduced. When assessing within PAR, however, it is possible to assess children at group levels daily in large classes ranging between 80 – 120. The teachers need to constantly work with their peers within PAR framework to devise practical ways of assessing large classes.
- Using children's written stories reinforces children's learning to read and write since through the written text they are able to see and learn how letters are shaped, words are written and hear how words are read. The teachers need to work with children within PAR to write a variety of children's stories.