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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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# **Adopting the Child-Centred Pedagogy for Teaching Reading and Writing in Local Language**

**Experiences from Uganda**





university of  
 groningen

# **Adopting the Child-Centred Pedagogy for Teaching Reading and Writing in Local Language**

Experiences from Uganda

**PhD thesis**

to obtain the degree of PhD at the  
University of Groningen  
on the authority of the  
Rector Magnificus Prof. E. Sterken  
and in accordance with  
the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on

Monday 4 June 2018 at 11: 00 hours

by

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my late sister Anna Stella Abur and to all the children who at their tender age lack the basic learning needs and to the teachers who lack the basic resources for teaching.

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## **Abbreviations**

ADEA	Association for the Development of Education in Africa
CA	Continuous Assessment
CCP	Child-Centred Pedagogy
CCT	Centre Coordinating Tutor
DIS	District Inspector of Schools
EFA	Education for All
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
IDPC	Internally Displaced People's Camp
L <sub>1</sub>	First language
L <sub>2</sub>	Second Language
LABE	Literacy and Adult Basic Education
LRA	Lord's Resistant Army
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MoI	Medium of Instruction
MT	Mother Tongue
NAPE	National Assessment of Progress in Education
NCDC	National Curriculum Development Centre
NCHE	National Council for Higher Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PLE	Primary Leaving Examination
PTC	Primary Teachers' College



TC	Thematic Curriculum
UNEB	Uganda National Examination Board
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UPE	Universal Primary Education
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WCEFA	World Conference on Education for All
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

## **Acknowledgements**

I am glad that this project rests on the shoulders of great women and men who made it possible for me to get here. Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my promoter Prof. Greetje Timmerman for her diligence, patience, support and immense knowledge that motivated me during the PhD journey. She encouraged me into doing a PhD by publication, a choice I would not have made alone, but because I read in her eyes and heard in her voice the assurance that she would work with me, I ventured into publishing. Her guidance helped me during the field research and writing the articles that ultimately formed this thesis. I could not have imagined having a better promoter and mentor for my PhD study. I owe gratitude to my co-supervisor, Ass. Prof. Speranza Namusisi, whose input through feedback has shaped this study. I would like to thank Prof. Jacques Zeelen for motivating me into taking on a PhD study and for arranging my first visit to the University Groningen in order to develop my concept paper. He too was very useful during the field work in Gulu, Uganda. His input during the field work and feedback workshops in Groningen and Gulu cannot be underestimated. Besides my promoter and supervisor, I would like to thank the Assessment Committee Prof. Winter, Prof. Kanyandago and Prof. Minnaert for their insightful comments and encouragement which helped me to fill the gaps I had overlooked in the writing process.

I am highly indebted to Prof. Marjolijn Verspoor, Chair of English Language and Culture Department at the University of Groningen, who did not only take time to review my first article and gave me very constructive feedback but also offered me opportunities to join the weekly seminars with the PhD students in the Faculty of Arts.

The comments, affirmation and suggestions I got from the seminars contributed greatly to this thesis. Prof. Marjolijn Verspoor also funded the publication of stories authored by children and teachers in the Acoli and English, one of the tangible outputs of my PhD study. The story books made a big difference in the life of the teachers and children who were using them in class. My cordial appreciation also goes to the members of the Acoli Language Board for proof reading and approving the stories written by children and teachers for use in the schools where I conducted the study as supplementary texts. Special mention here is Charles who always went an extra mile by offering space not only for the research team to have meetings but also to conduct feedback workshops on the story writing process. Robinson too has been very supportive and encouraging to me. His openness about the challenges of using local language as medium of instruction was a big push for me in approaching the schools with confidence. For your big-heartedness, I am forever grateful.

Without the research participants in this study from the primary schools in Gulu and Amuru districts, this thesis would not have been completed. I would like to express thanks to the teachers who participated in the preliminary study for laying bare before me the disturbing language situation in the rural primary schools. Their honesty and eagerness to share the challenges they faced in implementing the local language policy gave me the impetus to explore more about children's reading and writing in the local language. In particular I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the twelve teachers who willingly worked with me for the entire period of the study. They always looked forward to the feedback meeting in order to share their findings and experiences of implementing, monitoring and evaluating the interventions and they looked forward

to learning from their fellow teachers. Without your dedication and diligence in the research process, I would not have accomplished much. In particular I would like to refer to Santa, Concy, Alice, Irene, Nusula, Francis, Jenifer, Lilly, Christine, Joyce, Florence and Alaroker, who in spite of the heavy school duties and teaching load dedicated time for the study. Your hard works were not futile. May God reward you in abundance.

To the children in lower primary classes who courageously shared their experiences and views about the use of local language as medium of instruction, thank you for speaking up on behalf of the many children elsewhere who are facing similar challenges as you are. They helped me understand the challenges with the medium of instruction from their perspectives. Each time I observed them in class during the story telling sessions, the singing and dancing I got brainwave that boosted me for the next stages of the research. I still have very vivid memories of the times I spent with them. Children, you are so amazing.

I am also grateful to the school administrators of the three schools in Gulu and Amuru Districts that opened their doors to me right from the point of sharing my research interests with them up to the moment of winding up the study. I recall in my very first encounter in schools, one head-teacher told me, ‘you are welcome to help us solve the problem we have battled with for long’. Another one told me, ‘just leave the questionnaire with us, we shall give you all the answers you need and you can come and pick them after a week’. I told him that I did not have questionnaire and he asked me how I was going to collect data. I told him I shall be talking to them and planning how to improve children’s reading and writing in the local language. With great surprise, he

asked, 'talking for three years? That time is not there'. He, however, gave me the space to 'talk' with him, the staff and children. Before long, he asked for the schedule of my visits and the meetings with the different participants because he had seen the value of 'talking'. Even when he was transferred to a distant school, he continued to be part of the research group and even requested that his school be incorporated in the study. Mr Loum, thank you so much for trusting that I could work with the teachers and children to improve their proficiency in reading and writing for three years. Appreciation also goes to the school administrators and teachers who were transferred to other schools but still continued coming for the feedback workshops to share their views and to make contributions to the research. Important to mention here are Irene, Christine, Jenifer, Francis and Labeja.

To the feedback team, I don't have the words enough to express how I am indebted to your unwavering support, encouragement, criticism and advise for the entire period of the research process. Worth mentioning are Robinson, Charles, Samuel, Josephine, Irene and Nusula for going far beyond the call of duty.

To my colleagues at the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Science with who I had the privilege to work and interact, to consult in the PPC and attend the Action research methodology workshops with: Sandra, Jacqueline, Geerte, Vera, Femke, Alice, Peace, Frank, Marit, Nikhil, Proscovia, Dimitrievska, Alzira, Nathalie, Tuur and Wabike. Thank you to all the staff, PhD fellows and Master students who were with me for the Qualitative Research Methods in Zernike and the Academic Writing and Publishing course in the Language Centre. Important to mention here are Ajay, Wim, Lowa, Nikhil, Zaina and many more for their constant support and cooperation during my PhD

journey. Thank you so much for the inputs and stimulating discussions. I own lots of gratitude to the administrative staff in the Department of Pedagogy and Educational Sciences, who were always ready to receive me and direct me to Hans Knot to show me the office space where I would study for the three months I would spend in the University. Thank you so much for caring for me. The security personnel whom I met every morning as I picked the key to the PPC and in the evening as I returned the key, are heroes in their own right. Their wholehearted welcome and goodbyes always set me at peace. I felt they really meant well for me. Thank you and may God bless them.

The work presented in this thesis would not have been possible without my close association with those who mean well for me. I take this opportunity to extend my sincere gratitude to Ass. Prof. Angucia Margaret for introducing me to action research. I appreciate your advice, inspiration, encouragement and continuous support throughout my PhD study period. She told me many times, 'I am sure you will manage', and indeed I have managed. The pressure she put on me pushed me to the completing of this study. Margaret, I thank you for always standing by my side and for sharing in my life. I feel honoured to be associated with you.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to Dr Tukundane Cuthbert for his constant guidance, cooperation, motivation and support that kept me striving ahead in the PhD journey. He always helped me out when I got any difficulties or queries regarding field work or writing the articles. I cannot forget the first time I arrived in Groningen when he showed me St Joseph's Cathedral and Albert Hein Supermarket and as we moved around he told me, 'next year you will be in this place'. Little did I know he was being prophetic; his words came true when I was awarded a scholarship by Netherlands Fellowship

Programme (NFP). When I travelled alone to Groningen in order to embark on the PhD study, those were the two places I looked for first as I arrived at Antillenstraat. I will always cherish your kindness to me.

To the Congregation Leadership team of the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu, past and present, words alone cannot express how indebted I am to you. Thank you for encouraging me to go for my studies. When I sought permission from you to apply for scholarship, you had no objection. Thank you for the spiritual and moral support you accorded me during my study period. I will put into practice the knowledge and skills that I acquired not only to the benefit of Uganda Martyrs University but also for promotion of the Congregation. To Sr Cecilia who lived with me in the same community, you were a great inspiration to me. The once-in-a-while discussions we had during meals of our PhD researches, opened my mind to see my study from a different angle. May God shed His light upon you. Fr Agapitus, thank you for reassuring me and wishing me well. I pray that God keeps inspiring you as you write your PhD thesis.

I express my heart-felt gratitude to Hans and Dineke for always hosting us to special dinners in their house in Eelde. As we waited for Dineke to set up the table, Hans always engaged us in discussions that broadened our minds. In particular his scientific inputs opened my eyes to insights that I as an action researcher might not have seen. He provided invaluable feedback. I am grateful to Josje for diligently reading my first article. Her scientific inputs, personal helps and friendly nature has always made me feel at ease with her and I looked back on her for support during the course of my PhD. Each time I was in Groningen she shared with me books from her library that helped to broaden my understanding of Action research. She is one of the people who

encouraged me into publishing articles. I can't thank you enough for encouraging me throughout this experience.

To my employer, Uganda Martyrs University, I heartedly thank you for making it possible for me to take leave every year for three months to undertake my studies in the University of Groningen. In a special way I would like to thank Prof Olweny Charles for generously writing a recommendation to NFP for funding and for always according me support and granting me permission to travel to the Netherlands.

I would be unfair if I do not acknowledge the staff in the Faculty of Education and those in the Directorate of Quality Assurance at Uganda Martyrs University where I worked while at the same time pursuing my studies. I would like to heartedly express my gratitude to Ass. Prof. Mutonyi Harriet for inducting me into Action Research during the methodology classes. She increased the love for action research in me. Your ingenuity, generosity and understanding of my situation as a student encouraged me a lot. Mushabe, I am indebted to you for sharing with me the milestones in your PhD ventures. Each time I listened to you, I got consoled and gained courage to move on. I cannot underestimate the enormous contribution of Bro Byaruhanga into my studies. In particular I thank him for all the books and other reading materials that he shared with me. It reached a time when the books were too many for me and I had to tell him that I had enough to keep me going. Keep up the resourcefulness. I fondly thank Creatoris, Veronica, Agrace, Josephine, Constance, Geoffrey, Modest, John Paul, Christopher, Naris, James, Richard, Brian, Jesca, Juliet and Victoria for being patient with me and for sometimes taking over my workload when I was overwhelmed with studies. I look forward to the time when I can give you a hand too.



I gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the Netherlands Fellowship Programme (NFP) to fund my entire period of the study in the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, Department of Pedagogy and Educational Science. NFP provided resources for my travels, research, conferences, books, insurances, housing and other necessities. This PhD project would not have been possible without their financial input and support. At this point too I would like to appreciate the innumerable contributions of Erik, Wiebe, Gonny and Ivita for always ensuring that the travel arrangements, insurances and housings were in order before I travel to the Netherlands. Gonny and Ivita, it was not by coincidence that you were put in the international office. You all played immense roles in creating a home for me in the Groningen. May God reward you abundantly.

To the Ugandan community in Groningen with whom we shared light moments either in the apartments or restaurant, you provided the much needed destruction that refreshed my mind. Special mention goes to Proscovia, Kennedy, Debora and Luwa. Special gratitude also goes to Zaina, my Tanzanian friend with whom we had discussions of our work progress and occasionally had meals together in Hofstede de Grotekade. I can't forget Karadee and Bhagyashree whom I shared apartments with in Kraanvogelstraat. You two are wonderful. I wish you God's blessings in the pursuit of your PhD.

As always it is impossible to mention everybody who had an impact to this work however, there are those whose spiritual support is even more important. Last but not the least, I feel a deep sense of gratitude for my beloved parents, Muzee Justin and Jaja Mary Julia, who formed part of my vision and taught me good things that really matter

in life. Their infallible love and support has always been my strength. Their patience and sacrifice will remain my inspiration throughout my life. Each time I was to travel to the Netherlands I would go home to inform them of the journey. They always blessed me assured me that God would protect me and that I would come back and find them still alive. I would like to thank my sister, Anna Stella Abur (May she Rest in Eternal Peace. Amen) for encouraging me to pursue PhD. I had agreed with her that she would travel with me to the Netherland for the viva voce but unfortunately, she passed on before I could complete the study. Anna, you neither need visa nor air ticket to reach Groningen. I am sure you will be with me in spirit during my defence and with a smile congratulate me quietly. To Francesca, my niece I am grateful for your prayers. To my little friends, Apio and Acen I appreciate your childlike prayers that the plane should bring me back home quickly.

Finally and most important, I thank God for paving way for me to obtain full scholarship and for seeing me through all the ups and downs of my studies. I am now able to express gratitude to all those who in one way or the other contributed to the successful completion of my study, because God allowed it. I experienced God's providence and intervention day by day and I am sure that he had a hand in letting me finish my study. I will keep on trusting in your providence forever. Thank you, Lord.

# **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 (Obiegbu, 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

# Chapter 2

## **Local Language as medium of instruction: Challenges and way forward<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> The article has been published as: Lucy Dora Akello and M. C. Greetje Timmerman. 2017. Local Language as Medium of Instruction: challenges and way forward, in the Journal of Educational Action Research. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2017.1319287>.

**Abstract:**

The paper reports on a participatory action research study conducted in six rural primary schools in Uganda in 2013 to establish why children taught in the local language had difficulties in reading and writing. Findings through interviews, focus group discussions, reviews of exercise books and lesson observations indicated that though it was easier for pupils to learn the concepts in the local language; challenges ranging from poor translation, inadequate teachers' language proficiency, lack of instructional materials, high pupils' enrolment, lack of administrative support and teacher-centred approach of teaching, affected pupils' learning to read and write. Participants recommended adopting the child-centred pedagogy, incorporating instructional materials, conducting continuous assessment and recording pupils' competencies attained in reading and writing. Teachers need to engage more in Participatory Action Research in order to reflect on their practices and pupils' learning, and collaboratively decide what works best and what needs improvement in their classrooms.

Key words: local language; mother tongue; medium of instruction; Participatory Action Research

## **2.0 Introduction**

The study was conducted in six rural primary schools in Gulu and Amuru districts in Uganda. This was a period when Northern Uganda was recovering from the 25 years of civil war led by the Lord's Resistant Army. During the war situation, the schools were abandoned, the infrastructures were destroyed, and the teaching and learning materials were vandalised. The schools were relocated to 'learning centres' within the internally displaced peoples' camps. Such learning centres, along with most village schools struggled to stay intact while facing discouraging challenges (McCormac, 2008) such as collapsed school management systems, inadequate instructional materials, and widespread trauma among students, teachers and parents. The facilities were overcrowded and they lacked basic hygiene, including water and latrines (Lynd, 2007). After the war, the rehabilitation of the infrastructure and restocking of the teaching and learning facilities was done in phases but the facilities are still inadequate.

The targeted schools in this study used local language as MoI (MoI) from grade one to three and switched over to using English as MoI from grade four onwards. The study comprised of primary school teachers, head-teachers, deputy head-teachers, a member of the Acoli Language Board, a Tutor from a Primary Teachers' College and 1200 pupils.

### **2.1 Background to the study**

Language is a crucial factor in teaching and learning and that language could be mother tongue (MT) or foreign or local language. MT in a broad sense is the language of the immediate environment and daily interaction which 'nurture' the child in the first four years of his/her life, while the local language is the language of the immediate or

local community that the child is familiar with (Bühmann & Trudell, 2008; Ouane & Glanz, 2011). In this study, the local language is adopted as MoI from grade one to three and English as MoI from grade four onward.

In sub-Saharan Africa, there are between 1,250 and 2,100 languages of different status; but in spite of the many languages, many African countries 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). Some of those languages neither the learner nor the teacher understand and use well enough and yet Brock-Utne (2007) noted that children learn better when they can use a familiar language for engaging in interaction and acquiring new knowledge.

Recently, however, there has been a shift towards using language(s) that the learner is familiar with as MoI alongside a second language, either French or English or Portuguese or Afrikaans (Arua and Magocha, 2002; Muthwii, 2002; Ogechi, 2003; Bunyi, 2005; Heugh, Benson, Bogale & Yohannes 2007; Akello, 2009; Acana et al. 2010; Ngwaru & Opoku-Amankwa, 2010; Ahabwe 2011; Draku, 2011). This shift is in line with Ouane and Glanz (2010, 30) who affirmed that the use of the local language 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. In addition, UNESCO (2008) recommended that in order to encourage quality in the child's learning, the value of local language for instruction in early childhood and grades 1 to 3 classes must be pertinently identified.

In order to support the implementation of the language policy, a number of reforms were brought forth. For example in Uganda, the language policy was developed (Government White Paper, 1992) and in 2007 the Thematic Curriculum (TC) was introduced (National Curriculum Development Centre [NCCD], 2006). The TC language guidelines stipulated that whenever possible the child should learn in the home language or at least in a familiar language. In addition, all written tests that are used for assessment purposes are to be administered in the local language except the assessment in English language competencies. This is because higher achievement levels are reached in literacy when children study in a language which they already have a strong oral command in (NCDC, 2006). Other interventions 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 (Sentumbwe, n.d). The interventions within the thematic curriculum were overwhelmingly many and this negatively affected the outcome of the interventions since the teachers were not prepared in advance to implement them.

For the implementation of TC, teachers were trained in the child-centred pedagogy (CCP), schools were provided with instructional materials, teachers were trained to develop additional instructional materials, and continuous assessment was enforced (NCCD, 2006; 2008). Centre Coordinating Tutors (CCTs) and District Inspectors of Schools (DISs) were trained to monitor and offer curricular support to teachers in the use of local language as MoI from grade 1 to 3 and transition to using English as MoI from grade 4 onwards. It should however be noted that in spite of the interventions above, very few pupils in the districts of Acoli, Lango, Teso, Busoga,



Budaka, Palisa and Tororo are rated as proficient (Acana et al., 2010) in both local language and English. Pupils of grade three found difficulty in reading and comprehending a story, while many pupils lacked the ability to write words with the correct spelling and were not able to write a grammatically correct simple sentence. The literacy level in English of grade three pupils was equally inadequate. In reading comprehension, the majority of pupils could not read and comprehend a simple story and also lacked the ability to read and describe activities in a picture. Many experienced 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 (Muthwii, 2002; Acana et al., 2010). Based on the challenges of learning in local language above, the study therefore explored why children who were taught in the local language find difficulties in reading and writing and proposed ways forward. This was made possible through the adoption of the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR).

## **2.2 Participatory action research framework**

In order to gain insight into the challenges the pupils taught in the local language go through in reading and writing, a PAR framework was adopted. According to Selenger (1997 cited in MacDonald), PAR acknowledges that the problem originates in the community itself and is defined, analysed, and solved by the community. As a team-oriented practice, PAR brings about change and improvement in the community of practice and may contribute substantially to educational reforms (Morales, Abulon, Roxas-Soriano, David, Hermosisima & Gerundio, 2016). The education reforms take place when the stakeholders in education recognize and understand their contribution

to the problem at hand. Hensen (1996) emphasised that when teachers have ownership of the research process, learning can occur in numerous ways including trying new strategies, evaluating existing programs, expanding instructional repertoires, engaging in professional development, and most importantly helping teachers develop new pedagogical knowledge. In line with Morales et al and Hensen's arguments, it was justifiable for teachers as practitioners in the school community to engage in PAR in order to gain knowledge and take ownership of the challenges affecting their practices of using local language as MoI. PAR provided space for discussion, reflection and collaborative decision making as a means of improving children's learning and teachers' classroom practices.

PAR involves the full and active involvement of participants throughout the research process from the initial stages of identifying problem to the level of communicating final results. PAR processes are cyclical and they entail: identification of problem, gathering data, interpreting data, acting on evidence and evaluating results. In the problem identification phase, Eileen (2000) noted that teachers often have several questions they wish to investigate; however, he advised that it is important to limit the questions to one that is meaningful and doable in the confines of their daily work. He added that careful planning at this initial stage would limit false starts and frustrations. The data collection phase is an important step in deciding what action needs to be taken and so multiple sources of data such as interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and samples of student work are used to better understand the scope of happenings in the classroom. The third phase of interpreting data involved analysing and identifying major themes. During the fourth phase using the information from the data collected

and review of current literature, an action plan to guide the study would be designed. As the action plan is being implemented, it is important to continue to document and collect data on the intervention in order to determine if improvement has occurred.

We found PAR framework appropriate for the study because it did not only provide the space for the research team to get involved in the study right from the moment of identifying the challenges and narrowing them to two major challenges, namely, pupils challenges in learning to read and write in local language and teachers' challenges in teaching in local language; but also it helped the participants to propose way/s of improving teaching reading and writing in the local language.

### **2.3 Methodology**

The methodology was designed according to PAR framework, although only the first four stages were implemented; while the fifth phase was implemented and documented in Akello, Timmerman and Namusisi (2015). The teachers were fully involved in the first four stages of the PAR framework. The subsequent sections elaborate on how the PAR framework guided the study.

#### **2.3.1 Problem Identification**

In order to establish why pupils who are taught in the local language have difficulties in reading and writing, the teachers and pupils of lower primary classes participated in FGDs and group interviews respectively; while the head-teachers, deputy head-teachers, District Inspector of Schools and the Centre Coordinating Tutors participated in in-depth interview. A number of lessons were observed and pupils' exercise books were reviewed. The findings from the different sources above exposed a

series of challenges that affected teachers classroom practices and children's learning to read and write in the local language (see sub-section 2.4 below).

### **2.3.2 Participants**

The study comprised of a total of 24 primary school teachers, six head-teachers, six deputy head-teachers, two CCTs, one DIS, a member of the Acoli Language Board, a Tutor from a Primary Teachers' College and 1,200 pupils. These participants formed the research team. Teachers were selected because they are advocates for, and catalysts of change (Obanya, 2010), and therefore no education reform is likely to succeed without their active participation and ownership. Secondly, teachers' professional practices are affected; therefore they should be engaged and involved in the process of understanding the problem and working towards bringing change (Crane & O'Regan, 2010).

In this study teachers were not only involved right from the initial stages of identifying the challenges affecting children's reading and writing but also through their team leaders in each school, they coordinated among themselves and with the main researcher in determining the dates and venue for the school visits and feedback workshop. During the feedback workshop they presented data to fellow participants and participated in validating the findings and filling in the gaps. Additionally, the teachers in collaboration with each other proposed the adoption of the child-centred pedagogy as a better way of teaching reading and writing. They were very instrumental in identifying concepts that needed to be included in the action plan that would actualise the implementation of the CCP because of their experience in using the local language as MoI. Teachers' participation right from the initial stages of the study helped in gaining insight into the challenges children faced in learning reading and writing.

The pupils of grade one to three were involved in the study because they were in a better position to share their experiences of being taught in the local language. The Head-teachers, Deputy Head-teachers, DIS and CCT participated not only as monitors of the implementation of the local language policy but also as supervisors who offer support supervision to the teachers on challenges posed by local language education. The Acholi language board participated since they are in charge of developing the Acholi orthographies (Sentumbwe, n.d).

### **2.3.3 Data collection**

Data were collected through FGDs, in-depth interviews, review of exercise books and participant observations. The teachers participated in FGDs in order to give an overview of the challenges they and the children faced in using local language as MoI. The pupils participated in a group interviews since their views were crucial in helping the participants understand the challenges pupils faced in reading and writing in the local language and to plan ways of improving the situation. We conducted in-depth interviews with the head-teachers, deputy head-teachers, DIS and CCTs in order to find out their views on the use of local language as MoI.

Twelve lesson observations focused on how teachers and pupil interacted in the learning situation. According to Mulhall (2003) observation helps to understand and interpret behaviour. Engaging in observation therefore did not only help us to understand and interpret the pupils' and teachers' behaviour but also to gain insight into the experiences and challenges they go through in using local language as MoI. Pupils' exercise books were reviewed in order to establish how they write in the local language. The focus of the review was on spelling, punctuation, letter and word spacing,

and following lines while writing. As Polkinghorne (2005) noted, observation complemented the findings from FGDs, in-depth interview and review of pupils' exercise books. The use of four data collection instruments increased validity of the findings (Burton & Bartlett, 2005).

#### **2.3.4 Data analysis and interpretation**

The data obtained from in-depth interviews and FGDs, lesson observations and reviews of pupils' exercise books were grouped according to the themes and sub-themes that emerged. In all cases thematic analysis was done (Attride-Stirling, 2001). In order to discuss, reflect, interpret the finding and plan ways forward, the research team had a one day feedback workshop.

#### **2.3.5 Feedback workshop**

The purpose of the feedback workshop was to communicate the study outcomes (Hine & Lavery, 2013) to the participants. In this paper, the purpose of the feedback workshop was fourfold: first it enabled the participants to reflect and validate the findings and also to correct errors and identify omissions that may have occurred during transcribing the data. Secondly, it helped the participants to understand the range of similar challenges they were facing in the different schools. Thirdly, it offered the participants the opportunity to identify one core challenge to be studied further; and lastly it offered the space for the participants to propose an intervention to be implemented for the purpose of minimizing the challenge of low proficiency in reading and writing.

Among the challenges identified as having a greater effect on children's learning to read and write was the teacher-centred method. This finding is a confirmation of an

earlier study conducted in four district in Uganda (Guloba, Wokadala & Bategeka, 2010) in which they found that primary school teachers employed teacher-centred methods of teaching, instead of child-centred methods of teaching which are more effective.

In a study that compared the learning outcome of students who studied under the teacher-centred and the child-centred environments, it was noted that those who studied under the child-centred environment tended to engage in knowledge construction, while those who studied under the teacher-centred environment are characterized by transmission of information that is sadly insufficient to equip students not only with the communication and interpersonal skills, but also literacy skill (Gravoso, Pasa, Labra & Mori, 2008). According to NCCD (2006), the use of teacher-centred methods as opposed to the child-centred pedagogy (CCP) explains why there is poor quality education in Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools. In line with Guloba et al., (2010), Gravoso et al., (2008) and NCDC (2006), the participants therefore had a strong foundation for re-emphasising the used of the CCP for teaching reading and writing.

To facilitate CCP, Wang & Woo (2007) suggested the use of media and technology, while the National Curriculum Development Centre [NCDC] (2006) recommended the use of a variety of instructional materials and taking records of competencies attained. The use of media and technology was not practical in this study setting because of the lack of internet and skilled teachers and so the option suggested by NCDC (2006) was adopted. For effective implementation of the CCP the following were therefore adopted: the use of a variety of instructional materials; taking records of competencies attained, and involving children more in the teaching and learning

process. The teachers were to do continuous assessment and keep a research journal for recording their reflections on the teaching and learning process in order to improve not only children's learning but also their teaching practice (NCDC, 2006). The teachers, however, had difficulties in recording their reflections in a research journal.

The teachers were then to incorporate the adopted aspects of the TC into their scheme of work and lesson plans. This was purposely to give them freedom and space to exhibit their understanding of the CCP while at the same time creating autonomy and trust in them, and empowering them as contributors in the study. Secondly, to help the participants during implementing and monitoring the CCP to identify gaps in the teaching process and address them through feedback meetings and trainings.

#### **2.3.6 Action based on data and reflection**

In order to prepare an action plan, challenges pertaining to reading and writing were identified from the four grades during a feedback workshop. For example, in grade two it was noted that most pupils were unable to read individually, others failed to read words with more than three syllables, while others had difficulties in reading full sentences; and there was evidence of rote learning. In writing on the other hand, there was poor letter shaping, for example, b, d, e, y, g, p, j, s, ny, and ng, and some pupils wrote across the exercise book from one page to the next.

To address the challenges, only one action plan was prepared for each grade. This was because the different grades had similar challenges and secondly, it was to help the teachers learn from each other's experiences of implementing the CCP. In this paper, the action plan was based on the challenges identified from grade two for illustration (see Table I under sub-section 2.5).



### **2.3.7 Training needs**

After developing the plan for the implementation of the CCP, the teachers raised a concern that they were not sure of how to incorporate the CCP in their scheme of work and to actually implement it and so they needed to be trained. The teachers' request for training was not a surprise because it emerged during the interviews and also through findings in recent studies that have shown that many teachers have not been trained in the use of local language for instruction (Heugh & Mathias, 2014; NCDC, 2008). Therefore to bridge the gaps in training needs, a one day workshop was organised focusing on the following aspects: methods of teaching reading and writing, the use of instructional materials and conducting continuous assessment within the child-centred pedagogy. These training aspects were in line with the skills stipulated in the guidelines for implementing the thematic curriculum (NCDC, 2006). The training was facilitated by the CCT and Tutors. The CCT was involved because he was both a supervisor and trainer of teachers in implementing and monitoring the local language policy, while the Tutors were experts in the methods of teaching reading and writing. After the workshop the teachers incorporated aspects that were missing in their scheme of work and they prepared to implement the CCP for teaching reading and writing in the local language.

### **2.4 Findings**

In this section, the third and the fourth phases of PAR cycle are presented. The third phase involves interpreting data, analysing and identifying major themes, while the fourth phase involves using the themes in phase three to design an action plan to guide the study. The action plan (Table I) was implemented and documented in another study (see Akello, Timmerman & Namusisi, 2015). From the analysed data

seven themes emerged: translation and teachers' language proficiency, language preferences, instructional materials, methodology, assessment, administrative issues, teacher: pupil ratio, admission, parental role and teacher preparation.

#### **2.4.1 Emerging themes**

##### ***2.4.1.1 Translation and teachers' language proficiency***

The curriculum for the lower primary classes in Uganda is written in English and yet the MoI in the rural areas is the local language. Each subject teacher is therefore tasked with the responsibility of translating the curriculum into the local language and preparing the scheme of work and lesson plan. This task is challenging to the teachers since not all teachers have the skills of interpreting and translating. The lack of skills has led to many teachers to misinterpret and abandon the use of local language as MoI (NCDC, 2008). And even if they are proficient, there are some concepts that are not easily translated from English into the local language. The poor translation affects the subject content of what is finally taught to the children. Though some teachers worked in groups to do the translation, the quality of the translated text depended so much on their levels of proficiency. The challenge of translation was substantiated by teachers during a FGD:

It is very difficult to translate. It becomes even harder during scheming. There are some words that we cannot translate correctly. We sometimes gamble in translating. If the school administration could provide the text books in the local language from grade one to three concerning the themes in the curriculum, it would be helpful.

In an interview with the DIS on the use of local language as MoI, he stated that it was the right approach that would give children the foundation for learning new concepts. He, however, pointed out the challenges teachers face in managing the curriculum written in English.

The concepts can be understood very clearly in English but it becomes a challenge when a teacher wants to translate it into the local language. And this is because during the introduction of the thematic curriculum, there wasn't enough time to train teachers on how they can effectively implement the curriculum in the local language. Definitely, there was bound to be challenges.

The teachers' challenges in translation are not a new phenomenon. The NCDC (2008) earlier recognized that the implementation of the thematic curriculum was started without a well laid down system of having teachers who are competent to teach using the local language in place.

#### **2.4.1.2. *Language preferences***

In an interview with the head-teachers, they recommended the use of local language as MoI right from the kindergarten and English be taught as a subject as a better approach.

If we want to use local language well, then local language should start right from the kindergarten. But if at the kindergarten we continue to use English as MoI, then at primary we change to local language, eventually it becomes a tag of war for the learners to understand well. For one language to be used as medium of communication, it should

begin right from the kindergarten. Worst still the local language should have been time-tabled and taught after grade three to grade seven. Unfortunately, in schools where it is time-tabled it is usually replaced by another subject or activity. What are we doing to the children?

The pupils however, had a contrary view on the MoI. They preferred English as MoI right from grade one because of the educational benefits that accrued from it. They pointed out that the national examination was conducted in English and so learning English early would help them to read and understand the questions better and secondly, they wanted to learn English early in order to be able to communicate with people from other ethnic communities and also to prepare for their future career. The pupils' preference to English as opposed to the local language is not particular to the selected school only; studies elsewhere have reported similar situations (Muthwii, 2002, 2004; Trudell, 2007; Carol & Kwiri, 2013).

#### **2.4.1.3. *Instructional materials***

The arrangement for the implementation of the thematic curriculum was that the children should be provided with both text books and readers to help boost their reading skills (NCDC, 2006). The situation in the schools, however, was different; the teachers had the guide but the pupils' books were missing. A teacher reported that the children could not practice reading because the text books were inadequate and class readers were not there. During observation of a lesson on reading, a teacher had to write the stories on the chalkboard for the pupils to copy in their exercise books since the readers were not available. This situation is not unique to the schools in Uganda alone, many classrooms in developing countries, especially in poor and rural areas possess one

textbook, typically in the hands of the teacher. Pupils spend most of their time copying the content from chalkboards to notebooks, and then memorizing it (UNESCO, 2008).

In some schools, text books and the recommended charts that should accompany the curriculum for a particular unit were missing and yet the teachers were expected to teach. In another class, one book was shared among four to five children and in some instances as children scrambled for a book, they ended up tearing it. A teacher recounts her classroom situation:

One time only 30 books for grade four were brought and yet there were 102 pupils. I gave out the books and some pupils missed them. In another event I needed a wall chart that was recommended in the curriculum for a specific theme, but it was not there. Where would we get them from? How would we know what the wall chart looked like?

The inadequate instructional material is a long standing challenge to the implementation of the local language as MoI. For example, in a study by Heugh and Mathias (2014) and Oketcho (2014), they found that approximately 10 pupils were trying to read from one reader and so because they were not able to read, most learners recited from memory. The DIS, however, insisted that there should have been enough resource books in place to facilitate the training and implementing of the local language policy.

In relation to the lack of charts, a head teacher admitted that the charts were not given to all schools but explained that the content of the wall chart described in the curriculum were examples of how sentences could be built up and also examples of

proverbs that can be used for teaching. He emphasized that the teachers could use their knowledge of sentences construction and proverbs in local language to prepare appropriate charts for teaching. In his opinion, the teachers lacked creativity. The teachers' lack of creativity is a serious draw back to the development of instructional materials and the implementation of the local language policy and yet according to NCDC (2008), the teachers are urged to participate in providing locally produced materials which are relevant, low/no cost and appropriate to the teaching-learning process.

#### ***2.4.1.4. Teaching Method***

The teachers in sharing their experiences in using local language as MoI noted that children were active in the class, enjoyed the learning and interacted freely with each other since they understood what they were learning. They also reported that using English as MoI from grade four was a welcome change for the children but added that, 'though they are interested in learning in English, they cannot read texts written in English and even when they are given text to copy, they make a lot of errors'. The pupils' challenge in reading in English came to light during a FGD when pupils of grades three and four were asked to narrate stories in English. They could hardly make a simple correct sentence but when asked to narrate a story in the local language, they were excited and did it quite well. The transcript below from a FGD illustrates pupils' difficulties in reading in English:

**Akello:** who can tell us a short story in English? Who is ready to do it?

**Pupils:** Silence (no response)

**Akello:** Who can tell us in English what happened as you were coming to school today?

**Kilama:** (not real name), are you ready?

**Pupil:** No. I can't manage (response in Acoli).

**Akello:** What about a story in Acoli?

**Pupil:** I can try.

Much as it has been noted that the pupils have low proficiency in reading and writing, the teachers too have challenges in teaching the sounds and syllables. Most of them confuse syllables for sounds. An experienced teacher reported:

During our time when we were reading 'Cako Kwan I leb Acoli', the sounds and syllables were clearly differentiated. This sounds /b/ is confused with [ba] which is a syllable. The first thing to be taught is the letter sounds, /b/ not [ba], /l/ not [la], /ng/ not [nga] and /d/ not [da]. For example, in the word 'bag', you are to teach the individual sounds first then combine them to form a word. It is /b/ not [ba], /a/ not [aa] and /g/ not [ga]. If you teach syllables, then the pupils will pronounce it as [baga]. This is misleading and confusing for the pupils.

The failure of the children to learn reading and writing is blamed on the teachers who were new in the teaching profession. It was alluded to that they were not competent both in the English and local language sounds. One of the long serving teachers lamented:

When it comes to the sounds of the local language, it is even worse. Even from the training colleges, some of the students do not know the sounds and even how to write the local language. Some student teachers in writing mix capital letters with the small letters. I think even the tutors are not well versed with teaching sounds because these student teachers do not know how to teach reading. I think the problem is right from the training college.

One of the tutors during a feedback workshop session raised concern about the blame that was thrown on the training colleges for not teaching the student teachers well. She asked, ‘Is it the primary school teachers who give poor background to the student who joins the training colleges or is it the tutors who do not prepare the student teachers well for teaching in the primary school?’ To answer these questions, one may need to carry out a comprehensive study; however, this is beyond the scope of this paper.

#### **2.4.1.5. *Continuous Assessment***

Assessment is a very important component of the TC since it helps teachers to check not only children’s learning but also their own teaching practices and to prepare better for the next lesson. In this study though the teachers were aware of the importance of assessing children, they limited themselves to the end-of-unit and end-of-term assessments. It was, however, noted while reviewing pupils’ exercise books that although the children did class exercises, the teachers hardly marked the books and no constructive feedback was given. The teachers, conversely, blamed the lack of marking



books on high children's enrolment that made doing continuous assessment unprofitable. In agreement with the teachers, the DISs said:

The class teacher system is still a big challenge to assessment because the teacher: pupil ratio is high. That affects the quality of teaching and learning in the thematic class because teachers do not effectively carrying out continuous assessment, which is part and parcel of the implementation of the TC. More so, pupils' books are rarely marked and so it is hard to establish whether learning has taken place or not.

The views of the teachers and DIS are in line with that of Rateng (1992) who noted that large classes will make the teachers neither able to meet learning needs of the pupils, nor be able to mark pupils assignments thoroughly and promptly as required. Consequently, learners suffer low quality teaching and lack of continuous evaluation of the learning process.

#### **2.4.1.6. Administrative issues:**

The school administration is expected to provide instructional materials and put up infrastructures in order to create a conducive environment for learning.

##### ***i. Provision of instructional materials***

Instructional materials are central for the successful implementation of any programme. The teachers reported that some of the materials were to be provided by the Ministry of Education and Sports and some like manilas and markers were to be provided by the school administration. In some cases pupils brought the materials for preparing their instructional materials from home. In some schools, however, the

materials were provided, but the teachers did not use them since they lacked drawing skills. In schools where teachers were ready to draw, the school administration did not provide the required materials. In general, the teachers relied on the local materials within reach of school to prepare instructional material. A teacher narrated her plight:

Sometimes we improvised by buying manila cards, markers and sometimes we asked pupils to bring banana fibre and short grass for making ball, skipping ropes and toys. We could have done better, but partly the administration did not support us even when they were aware that we had difficulties. When we made requisition, we were told that there was no money.

In another school where the instructional materials were prepared, they were removed and destroyed by other children because the class in which they were stored was turned into a dormitory. A teacher recounted her frustration:

Last term, I prepared so many good learning aids for grade 2 class and the children were coping up well with reading and writing, but when I came back for third term, I found that the learning aids were destroyed and the class was turned into a dormitory for grade 7 pupils. You can even see it there (points to the class). Now I cannot begin preparing others for the third term.

The incomplete infrastructures in the lower classes posed challenges to care and protection of instructional materials prepared. Out of the six schools visited, a grade

four classroom had no door and window shutters, and it had a mud floor. A teacher described the nature of her classes:

The classroom situation is unacceptable. For my school, every door is left open and anybody can enter freely. So the prepared learning aids were destroyed by children from the upper classes. Teaching the children became very difficult without instructional materials. Children want to hear, see and touch then they learn.

According to Rateng (1992), teacher-made materials take a lot of the teacher's time and efforts to prepare; therefore they should be stored carefully after use so that such efforts do not turn to waste. Therefore pupils should never be allowed to tamper with them without proper guidance and supervision.

Much as the lack of instructional materials is blamed on the school administrations, some parents and teachers also have a stake in it. For example, in all schools some teachers were not creative enough to use the local environment. In order to minimise the challenge of instructional material, Rateng (1992) encouraged the teachers and administration to engage in constant curriculum material review on the basis of cost-benefit analysis. In this way appropriate and cheap materials can be improvised to aid teaching.

**ii. Infrastructure**

The impact of crowded classroom was imminent in the schools visited. Overpopulation caused difficulties in class management and movement for the teacher and pupils alike. This was confirmed during lesson observation in which we saw four pupils squeezed on one desk. In some cases five smaller children sat at a desk. This lack

of space did not give the children the right posture for positioning themselves to write, let alone the space to put their exercise books for writing. A class teacher of 112 pupils articulated her challenge:

My class is really crowded. There is over-enrolment. Four to five pupils sit at a desk. I do not even have space for movement. Sometimes I step on them and other times they step on each other. Secondly my teaching time is partly spent on managing the crowded class.

Rateng (1992) noted that overcrowding makes movement around the class very difficult for both the teacher and the learners; and it hampers the teacher's role and effectiveness as a supervisor. According to UNESCO (2008), the dilapidated state of schools and overcrowded classrooms add up to unsatisfactory learning conditions.

### ***iii. Teacher: pupil ratio***

The imbalance between enrolment, recruitment of teachers and the provision of facilities to cater for the increasing number has remained a glaring problem. Evidence from class observation showed that pupils' number ranged from 90 – 130 per teacher. In one school all the children in grade one lacked the desks for sitting, while in all schools four to five children sat at a desk. The crowded classroom does not only deny children chances of participating in the learning process but also leads to increased workload for teachers. When teachers' views were sought about the number of pupils in class one of them responded:

Their number is big. They are too many to be taught because with grade one; you need to teach them individually

according to their interest. You see? So when you teach the whole class like that and you don't care for their individual differences, they don't learn.

The teacher's response reflected a similar situation in Thailand in which due to the large classes teachers adopt the lecture based instruction, resulting in passive, non-participative, and disengaged students (Vaiyavutjamai & Clements, 2006). Other studies on the effect of class size on learning also pointed out that crowding in classes decrease classroom engagement and results in poor learning whereas in small classes pupils receive more individual attention from teachers, participate actively and learn (Blatchford, Bassett & Brown, 2011; Fortes & Tchantchane, 2010). This high teacher: pupil ratio affects learning and so there is need to devise effective ways of teaching large classes.

***iv. Children's admission***

In all the schools we noted that some children lagged behind in learning and the school administration was responsible for it since they continued admitting pupils for more than a month into the term. Some children were under-aged and so they found it hard to participate in the activities that the older children were involved in. A teacher of grade one reported:

New enrolment took place daily. So those who were enrolled late found it hard to catch up with the rest of the children. Giving them remedial to bridge the gap in learning created another challenge since the content was too much. Secondly, some children are under-aged. Like I have a five year old boy in grade one who finds it hard to grasps the concepts and he

will find difficulties in the future. We complained but we could not reach a consensus because the parent wanted the child to be in school. We are working like baby-seaters. Some need mother's love. It takes time for the teacher to learn such children.

In other schools on the contrary, children admitted were over-aged and due to the big age gap, they felt inferior and sometime dodged classes, therefore resulting into poor performances. Another teacher testified:

Some are above the age of grade one children. For example there is 13 year old girl who has been a baby-seater for a long time and now they have decided to send her to study. She does not fit in grade one, she spends most of her time with those in the upper classes. She feels inferior in the class. Treating her at the level of grade one is being unfair to her.

**v. Parental role**

Parents' involvement in the education of the child is an important motivating factor for learning. In this study, it was realized that some parents exhibited non-committal behaviour to the education of their children. Some parents think that when they have sent the child to school, then everything should be catered for by the school. A teacher described the parents' inattention to their children's education:

Parents are aware that they should support their children's learning but they do the contrary. They send the children to school without writing materials or with only one exercise

book that they used for all the subjects. Sometimes the children have no pens and they borrow from their colleagues. In other instances, when some children stop on the way and go back home, the parents do not bother to come to school to find out why. Some of them do not even ask the children about what they have learnt at school and do not even support them in doing homework. They expect that the child will get all the support from school, yet learning begins from home. The reading culture should begin from home, then the teacher can supplement.

Jackson and Remillard (2005) highlighting the role of the parents stressed that providing a place for the child to learn at home and asking a child about school, contribute significantly to children's approaches to learning, especially motivation and attention and low level of classroom behaviour problems. In addition, Bradley (2002) emphasizes that practices such as reading to children, using complex language, responsiveness, and warmth in interactions promote children's development of skills.

**vi. *Teacher preparation***

The challenge schools are facing in the implementation of the local language as MoI is the inadequate preparation of teachers up to the level of teaching itself coupled with negative attitude. The teachers' lack of preparation was echoed by the DISs:

Many of the teachers have negative attitude towards using local language as MoI. Many of them for generations, almost 100% were not trained to use local language as MoI; and so when this reform came, the amount of time for training

teachers to take the reform was inadequate. The Ministry of Education should have known that when a reform comes, one thing is tackling the attitude because in most case there is resistance to innovation.

The teachers in defence of their lack of skills in implementing the language policy blamed the trainers for the lack of follow-up and support supervision after the training. One of them insisted, 'since we had the training nobody has come to help us in the translation. The worst thing we had a facilitator who was a non-Luo speaker. He used English throughout and so we gambled with translation'. A head-teacher too shared a frustrating experience he went through during the training: 'we had to sit together to translate, but we ended up adulterating the language because we were not prepared for the activity'. DIS shared in the teachers' sentiments about the lack of follow up after the training, he criticized the MoES for the laxity in planning for support supervision and he reiterated that, 'for the implementation of the TC to take off well, the Ministry of Education should have planned for support supervision for a period of time before relaxing it'.

The lack of preparation for the introduction and implementation of the TC was attributed to the inadequate duration of training for the teachers of the different classes. A District Inspector of Schools testified:

The duration for training was not enough. I remember participating in the training. The TC was first introduced in grade one and it took two weeks. To me that was a bit adequate. However the training of teachers of grades two



and three was done in a rush. There should be consistency when a reform is being introduced. With that kind of training you cannot expect effective implementation.

The lack of preparation for actual teaching was evidence in three classes. For example in one class a teacher held the instruction material on her chest as she was teaching. In another class a teacher wrote a different word on the board but kept reading a word that was not there. The pupils also kept repeating. In grade three class the drawings on the chart were tiny and could not be seen from the back. The persistent cry for the lack of preparation from the key players in implementing the TC is a clear indication that the policy makers have not envisaged clearly how to roll down policies to the grassroots in order for it to take off effectively. As Dyer (1999) puts it, there is an urgent need for research that focuses on the implementation process in order to improve our knowledge on the actual processes of change, the potential problems and issues that can emerge and methods of addressing them.

### **2.5. Designed action plan**

The design of the action plan was based on the challenges identified is the third phase of participatory action research. In an effort to address children's challenges in reading and writing in the local language, the participants, the majority of who were the class teachers, proposed the implementation of the Child-centred pedagogy (CCP) as opposed to the teacher-centred method. For the practical implementation of the CCP, the participants identified and outlined the objectives to be achieved based on the areas of weaknesses that were affecting children's learning to read and write in the local language. They also proposed the activities to be carried out during the teaching and learning process and identified the resources that would be needed for the

implementation of the CCP. The timeframe for the implementation of the plan was aligned to the school term calendar and the possible outcomes were anticipated. These proposals are detailed in the action plan below (see Table I).

**Table I: Planned activities for grade two classes from Mid-February to Mid-May, 2013**

<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Time-frame</b>	<b>Output</b>
To provide more practice in reading and writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making more reading materials on flash cards</li> <li>• Modelling letters</li> <li>• matching words to pictures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• manila cards</li> <li>• clay</li> <li>• markers</li> <li>• pictures</li> <li>• charts</li> </ul>	Mid-February to Mid-May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Displayed pupil's work</li> <li>• ability to read and write correctly</li> <li>• ability to match words to pictures</li> </ul>
To use a variety of instructional materials during reading and writing lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cutting papers</li> <li>• modelling letters e.g. b, d, e, y, g, p, j, s, ny, ng and w</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Papers/card boxes,</li> <li>• clay</li> <li>• Sticks,</li> <li>• pair of Scissors,</li> <li>• charts,</li> <li>• flash cards</li> <li>• Real objects</li> </ul>	Mid-February to Mid-May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sharps cut out of paper,</li> <li>• written letters on flash cards</li> <li>• written words on flash cards</li> </ul>
The pupils to be able to read and write well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• break words into syllables</li> <li>• read as a class, as group and as individuals</li> <li>• matching words to pictures</li> <li>• copying words and short sentences</li> <li>• involving parents during the lesson</li> <li>• talking about pupils' writing with pupils and parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• charts,</li> <li>• flash cards,</li> <li>• parents</li> <li>• pupils' writing</li> <li>• manilas</li> <li>• markers,</li> <li>• coloured pencils</li> </ul>	Mid-February to Mid-May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• displayed pupil's work,</li> <li>• ability to read at class, group and individual levels,</li> <li>• copied words/sentences correctly</li> <li>• writing short sentences not across the pages</li> <li>• parents' responses on pupils reading and writing</li> <li>• records of discussion on pupil's writing</li> </ul>

## **2.6. Conclusion**

In this study we had set to find out why children who were taught in the local language found difficulties in reading and writing with the intention of proposing a way forward. Guided by participatory action research framework, the participants identified several challenges such as teacher-centred approach of teaching, poor translation, teachers' language proficiency, lack/inadequate instructional materials, ineffective assessment, lack of administrative support, high pupils' enrolment, learner's background, lack of parental involvement and poor teacher preparation. These challenges were too many and could not be addressed at once and so, it was appropriate that the participants limited the challenges to one that was having a greater impact and was doable in the confines of their daily work. Among the challenges, teacher-centred method was rated as having a greater impact on children's reading and writing in the local language. In order to minimize this challenge, the participants proposed the adoption of a Child-centred pedagogy. It was agreed that as the CCP was being implemented, the teachers were to incorporate a variety of instructional materials, carry out continuous assessment and keep records of competencies attained for purpose of improving children's competencies in reading and writing in the local language.

It should however be noted that it was not the first time the issue of implementing the child-centred pedagogy was emphasised. It came into operation in 2007 with the introduction of the thematic curriculum in Uganda. Looking back, it can be said that a number of changes took place; for instance, the reintroduction of the use of the local language, establishment of the local language board to support the development of orthographies and the establishment of a supervisory support from the teacher training colleges. Nevertheless, a lot still remains to be put in place

in order to realise the intended goal of reintroducing the use of the local language as MoI. For instance the books need to be provided and more teachers need to be recruited to cater for the ever increasing number of children enrolling for primary education.

The adoption of the PAR was appropriate for the study since it helped the participants to be involved in the study process right from the beginning of identifying problem up to developing an action to be implemented at a later stage. Participation in PAR helped them to own the challenges of teaching reading and writing and to propose ways forward. The children too clearly stated their preferences for English as a MoI as opposed to the local language and also request that the teachers prepare for them reading materials to help them improve their reading skills. In this instance it is clear that through participating in PAR the children found the space to share their opinion about their own learning.

In the initial stages of the study, it would look like the teachers were blaming every one for all the things that did not go right in the classroom and in children's learning. However, later on, they were able to recognise their contribution to the challenges in their classroom and so they pledged to make changes in form of suggesting an intervention. This recognition and owning up of their contribution to the challenges was made possible through PAR that gave them the space to reflect, discuss and see clearly the root cause of the challenge and therefore proposed a way of handling it to improve practice and promote children's learning.

## **2.7. Implication of the study for policy and practice**

There is clear evidence from this study that suggest that participatory action research is a worthwhile investigation for teachers to undertake. This is because it offers teachers a safe space to share, reflect, collaborate, and participate (Holter and

Frabutt, 2012; Mills, 2011) in the process of inquiry that leads to addressing areas of concern in children's learning and in their own classroom practices. Additionally, action research provides teachers with the technical skills and specialised knowledge required to effect positive change within classrooms, schools, and communities (Stringer, 2008). Ultimately, the solutions-based focus, emphasis on fostering practitioner empowerment, and pragmatic appeal of action research collectively render this research methodology a worthwhile professional development activity for teachers.

At the introduction of the thematic curriculum, the teachers were encouraged to use the child-centred pedagogy but they did not implement it with the reason that CCP can only be practical and effective in small classes of about 40 – 50 pupils. Collaborative participation in identifying, reflecting and discussing the challenges, helped the teachers to view their role as involving reflection on issues that affect their practice and children's learning and of devising means of improving their practice. In fact they realised that there was great power in collaborating with others to address common issues. It is therefore important for teachers to work in collaboration with other teachers in identifying challenges that pertain to their practice in order to help them come with ways of improving their practices.

Through involvement in PAR there was substantial change in attitude in the ways teachers viewed their practices. Instead of focussing only on the challenges, they realised that they could initiate change even if the situation looked deplorable through creatively working in collaboration with teachers from six different schools. As a study team they went a step further to propose and plan for change in order to improve their teaching practice and children's learning. The school administration

should therefore support teachers in engaging in action research as a means of promoting positive change in attitude and improving the teaching practice.

You learn to write better by reading. You learn to read better by writing. Reading and writing work together to improve your abilities to think



# **Chapter 3**

## **Teaching reading and writing in Local Language using the Child-centred Pedagogy in Uganda<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> This has been published as: Dora Lucy Akello, Greetje Timmerman & Speranza Namusisi, 2015. Teaching reading and writing in Local Language using the Child-centred Pedagogy in Uganda. *Language and Education*, 30(3), 252–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2015.1106553>.

## Abstract:

Uganda introduced the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in primary schools in 2007. This was meant to promote interaction and participation in the learning process and improve children's proficiency in reading and writing. Drawing elements of interaction and participation from the socio-cultural theory, the child-centred pedagogy was introduced. This intervention, however, did not yield the expected results. Children taught in the local language still had problems in reading and writing. A participatory action research framework was used to gain insights into the child's learning to read and write within a re-emphasised child-centred pedagogy. In this paper, we argue that involving children at individual and group levels, conducting continuous assessment and using appropriate instructional materials help children to learn and improve their proficiency in reading and writing. Some pupils however, still find difficulties in reading three syllable words, constructing simple sentences and punctuating their work. For the children to improve their proficiency in reading and writing in mother tongue, the teachers need to use more instructional materials, carry out continuous assessment in small groups and design learning activities that promote children's interaction and participation.

**Key words:** First language; medium of instruction; classroom methodology; Child-centred Pedagogy; Participatory Action Research; mother tongue

### **3.0 Introduction**

Recent studies in sociolinguistics show a shift towards using mother tongue (MT) or language(s) that the learner is familiar with as medium of instruction (MoI) for initial education (Ouane & Glanz, 2010, 2005; Alidou et al., 2006; Heugh et al., 2007; Yazıcı, Ilter & Glover, 2010; Akello, 2009; Linehan, 2004; Butzkamm, 2003; Government White Paper, 1992). This is because learners who understand the language they are instructed in are more likely to engage meaningfully with content (Gacheche, 2010) and achieve higher levels of literacy (National Curriculum Development Centre [NCDC], 2006). Using MT as MoI allows teachers and students to interact naturally and negotiate meanings together, creating participatory learning environments conducive not only for cognitive but also linguistic developments (Benson, 2004 & Linehan, 2004). MT or first language (L<sub>1</sub>) in a broader sense is the language(s) of the immediate environment and daily interaction which ‘nurture’ the child in the first four years of life (Ouane and Glanz, 2010, 62). MoI is the language in which basic skills and knowledge are imparted to the learners and the medium in which the production and reproduction of knowledge take place (Ouane and Glanze, 2010, 2006). In this paper Acoli is the MT and L<sub>1</sub> as well as the MoI. MT and L<sub>1</sub> will be used interchangeably.

Since language is the means of communicating meaning in most learning activities, building self-esteem, sharing cultural values and promoting identity (Tembe and Norton, 2008; Benson, 2004; Linehan, 2004), it is essential that a language which the learners understand and speak is used in education (UNESCO, 2005). The use of MT for teaching and learning of all subjects, including foreign-language lessons, is the child’s strongest ally and should, therefore, be used systematically (Adebayo, 2008; Butzkamm, 2003).

Most countries in Africa that use MT as MoI for initial education purposes transition to using a foreign language as MoI from grade four onwards. Uganda is no exception to this shift. In 2007 with the introduction of the thematic curriculum, the child-centred pedagogy (CCP) and the use of MT as MoI was introduced in the lower primary school (Ahabwe, 2011) since it was realised that pupils' proficiency in literacy was low. Over the years reports from the national assessment of progress in literacy (Acana et al., 2010) reflected that grade three pupils had difficulty in reading and comprehending a story; while many pupils lacked the ability to spell words correctly and write grammatically correct simple sentences. The literacy level in the English of grade three pupils was equally low. The majority of pupils could not read and comprehend a simple story and lacked the ability to read and describe activities in a picture. In writing, many pupils spelt words wrongly and could not write names of common objects shown in a picture.

The problem of low proficiency is not unique to Uganda. A number of studies in Nigeria (Igboanusi, 2008), Ghana (Owu-Ewie, 2006), Malawi (Chilora, Jessee, & Heyman, 2003), Zambia (Dzinyela, 2001), and Kenya (Ogechi, 2003; Muthwii, 2002); have recorded low levels of proficiency at the lower primary school levels. The continuous low levels of proficiency in reading and writing of the pupils indicate serious problems that call for intervention. Since the CCP that was meant for teaching in the lower primary was not well implemented in Uganda (Ahabwe, 2011), its implementation within a participatory action research (PAR) framework for teaching reading and writing in the local language was re-emphasised. This paper reports how CCP was implemented in teaching reading and writing in local language within the PAR approach in primary schools in Uganda.

The subsequent sections focus on the language policy in Uganda, the recent reforms in education, the socio-cultural theory that forms the background of the reforms, the methodology and findings of the study. The last section discusses some preliminary conclusions and recommendations for future research and practices of educational reform in Uganda.

### **3.1. Language policy in Uganda**

Uganda is a multilingual country with forty-three indigenous languages spoken alongside English and Kiswahili (Gordon, 2005). Of the forty-three languages, only five area languages of wider communications were selected as regional MoIs for an estimated 80 – 90% of the population in lower primary. These include: Luo (Acholi, Lango, and Dopadhola), Luganda, Lugbara, Runyakitara (Runyoro/Rutooro, Runyankore/Rukiga), Ateso (Ngakaramojong and its variant), (Ward, Penny and Read, 2006). In Uganda English is the official as well as second language (L<sub>2</sub>).

The language policy stipulates that schools, save for some in urban areas, should teach all subjects, except English, through mother tongues from grade one to three. Every school adopts the dominant language of the community it is situated in as a MoI or retains English only if the dominant community language is unclear. English becomes the MoI from grade four onwards (Government White Paper, 1992). The multilingual nature of the population, however, has posed problems to policy makers when it comes to MoI and examination in the primary school (Muthwii, 2002, 4) since not every child, especially in the urban areas, is proficient in the selected area languages.

This language policy is faced with mixed reactions from some stakeholders. The elite parents think the children in the rural areas are marginalised and denied

the chance to compete favourably with their counterparts in the urban centres; moreover, the national exams are set in English and not MT (Muthwii, 2004). Some studies in sub-Saharan Africa also reflect parents' preference for English as MoI right from grade one (Ngwaru & Opuku-Amankwa, 2010; Namusisi, 2010; Tembe & Norton, 2008 and Arua & Magocha, 2002) for purposes of children's upward mobility and the desire to be part of a wider and more international communities (Muthwii, 2004). These sentiments point to the fact that it is difficult to determine the MT in multilingual situations since in some contexts children can have multiple MTs (Ricento, 2002). Moreover the selection of a local language is not just for pedagogical issues but has significant cultural and political implications (Penny et al., 2008). To understand the language policy better, let us look at the education reforms in Uganda.

### **3.2. Thematic Curriculum in Uganda**

The 1992 Education Review report (Government White Paper, 1992, 39) highlighted the language policy for the primary schools that was implemented between 2000/2002. This curriculum comprised four core subjects: Language, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies and eight other subjects. The curriculum however did not pay sufficient attention to listening, speaking, reading and writing in the first three years of primary school (Penny et al., 2008). The teaching approach was mostly teacher-centred. Writing consisted of copying from the board or taking dictation. Interaction was characterised by choral responses, repetition, cued-response and rote learning. More focus was and is still on the summative assessment. Soon it was realised that proficiency in reading and writing were continuing to decline because of badly implemented literacy programs (Draku, 2011; Penny et al.,

2008). This called for another curriculum review in 2004 that brought in the thematic curriculum (TC).

The Government of Uganda introduced the TC in 2007 (Acana et al., 2010; NCDC, 2006) to be taught in local languages from grade one to three. This was 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). The TC seeks to develop basic language skills for lifelong learning. It is based on three main principles (NCDC, 2006, p. iv):

- a. rapid development of literacy, numeracy and life skills at the lower primary school level;
- b. the treatment of concepts holistically, under themes of immediate meaning and relevance to the learner; and
- c. the presentation of learning experiences in languages in which the learners are already proficient.

In the new curriculum, knowledge and competences are arranged in accordance with a thematic approach and the teaching methodology emphasised the child's activities rather than the teacher's (NCDC, 2006, 9). It encourages active participation of all children in their learning by exploring, observing, experimenting and practising. The suggested activities such as songs, games, acting and drawing, are intended to be enjoyable. As a result, a significant amount of class time should be taken up by group or pair work or by individual children working independently of the teacher. The teacher is to adopt a child-centred approach by putting the child's interest, experiences and needs at the centre of the curriculum in order to increase interest in learning the different subjects they are to study in later years (Draku, 2011).

CCP is accompanied by competency-based discourses and official shifts in curriculum and assessment policy designed to lessen the significance of examinations and enhance the importance of continuous assessment (CA) as a means of stimulating child-centred pedagogies. Contemporary understandings of the child-centred education are based on Vygotskian cognitive psychology, and differ from pedagogies based on the behaviourist psychology which has been the model of curriculum and instruction in Uganda (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008, 197).

The teacher's role in the classroom is to motivate, facilitate and structure the child's own discovery and search of knowledge (Altinyelken, 2010) by providing a supportive learning environment (Tzuo, Yang & Wright, 2011). This makes learning an active and interactive process between students since learning is constructed together in social activity.

The curriculum describes rich and varied literacy environment for the child and emphasizes the need for and use of varied learning resources including flash cards, word/sentence cards, wall charts, work cards, simple readers and the children's own written work. The learning materials used in the first three years of primary education are provided in the child's own language or a language familiar to the child (NCDC, 2006, 10).

The thematic curriculum further stipulates that whenever possible the children should learn in the home language or at least in a language that is familiar to them. This is because higher achievement levels are reached in literacy when children study in a language which they already have a strong oral command (NCDC, 2006). In addition, all written tests that are used for assessment purposes are administered in the local language except the assessment in English language competencies.



The new curriculum emphasises CA as opposed to summative assessment.

The main principles of CA are:

- the assessment is to be carried out during the normal lesson time,
- teachers are 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 has not achieved a competence in one lesson under a particular theme, the teacher should record the competence when achieved later.
- modes of assessing children's competences are:
  - observation in the class
  - listening to children in class
  - reviewing their exercise books
  - marking their handwriting (NCDC, 2006b, p. 12).

To understand more the child-centred pedagogy, let us look at Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory.

### **3.3. The Socio-Cultural theory**

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 (Vygotsky cited in Dorn 1996). During the class interaction, the teacher is to offer 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 play active roles in the learning process by sharing experiences, taking part in the group or class discussions.

Vygotsky elaborated on the social dimension of learning, by developing the notion of a zone of proximal development (ZPD). He placed the interaction with adults and more competent peers at the heart of this zone since it is in this zone that teachers and more experienced peers can lay their hands on the learning processes going on in the child's mind. To facilitate interaction, the MT or a language that the child is familiar with is essential since MT instruction increases the potential for students to interact with others around content (Brock-Unte, 2007). Through using the MT, learners integrate school-acquired knowledge with prior knowledge and develop vocabulary as they interact with peers, family, and teachers. Vygotsky 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 was used as ground for gaining insight into the teachers' experience of using MT as MoI in lower classes and transition to using English as MoI from grade four in the rural primary schools. The theory was useful in evaluating the impact of CCP during class observation, interview and review of pupils' exercise books.

### **3.4. Methodology**

This is a participatory action research (PAR) study conducted in three primary schools in Northern Uganda, from 2012 to 2014. PAR framework was used to gain insight into the child's learning to read and write within a re-emphasised child-centred pedagogy. In this framework, the participants jointly cooperated in the process of defining, analysing, implementing and evaluating the outcome (Mitchell, Reilly & Logue, 2009) of using CCP in the language classroom. Being cyclical, (McTaggart, 1991) the whole process was repeated after six months in order to address any emerging challenge that hinge on children's learning to read and write.

The study was conducted in six phases beginning with identification of schools and participants in July 2012. This was followed by preliminary data collection in August to establish the local language situation in the primary schools. Feedback was given to the participants during a one day workshop in November, 2012 and training of teachers was conducted in February 2013. The implementation of the CCP started in March, 2013 and continued till August 2013. During this period, there was monitoring and evaluation of the effect of CCP on children's learning to read and write. In the sixth phase, feedback was given to the participants on the implementation of CCP in November, 2013. Guided by the outcomes of the feedback, especially the area of weaknesses in the research process and in children's learning, we planned for the next cycle of the research and started another phase of implementing the CCP.

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

The choice of PAR was to help teachers of literacy from grade one to three and teachers of English in grade four not only to conduct research in their own practice in order to improve it (Burton & Bartlett, 2005), but also to engage in collaborative research with others from inside and outside the school. Through PAR teachers reflected and shared their experience of implementing the CCP in the lower primary classes. The reflections gave them better understanding of how to implement CCP for teaching reading and writing in the local language.

The District Inspector of Schools, Head-teachers, Deputy Head-teachers, Centre Coordinating Tutors (CCT) and pupils provided preliminary data that exposed the language situation on the ground and it helped in designing the study. In the actual study, nine teachers of literacy, three teachers of English in grade four and 945 pupils of grade one to four from three primary schools participated in the first year of study. As the pupils were promoted to the next class, their number reduced because the new entrants in grade one and those pupils promoted to grade five were left out. A feedback team consisting of District Inspector of Schools (DISs), a head-teacher, CCT, a primary school teacher, a tutor and a representative of the parents, played the roles of 'critical friends' by offering advice and support during the research process (Kember, Ha, Lam, Lee, Ng, Yan & Yum, 1997).

The teachers participated in focus group discussions (FGDs) since they are at the centre of translating the curriculum from English to local language, interpreting it, planning for teaching and implementing it. The discussion helped to gain insight into a range of views from the perspective (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011) of the teachers who are practically using local language as MoI. The DISs, head teachers, deputy head teachers and two CCTs were subjected to in-depth interviews because they play roles in monitoring and enforcing the implementation of the language policy in schools.

The observation of eighteen lessons in seven classes focused on the level of interaction between the teacher and pupils and among more competent peers during the actual teaching process. The more competent peers in this paper are pupils who are more proficient in the local language than others. We paid attention to the learning environment to ascertain whether or not it supported learning. The observation was recorded on an observation check list form. Observation

complemented the findings (Hennink et al., 2011) from FGD, and in-depth interview and it facilitated in finding out how (Flick, 2009) CCP was being implemented for teaching reading and writing using local language. Review of the exercise books of the pupils helped in identifying the areas of competencies and challenges that the pupils had in writing. The use of four data collection instruments was intended to increase validity of the findings (Burton & Bartlett, 2005).

The findings, majorly pedagogical in nature, were presented to the participants during a feedback workshop for the purpose of confirming authenticity or lack of it (Tukundane, 2014) and also for getting feedback from the participants (Burton & Bartlett, 2005). During a feedback session, the teacher-centred approach was identified as a challenge contributing to the pupils' low proficiency in reading and writing in the local language. This prompted the adoption of the CCP as an intervention.

Prior to the implementation of the CCP, a one day training workshop was conducted to provide more skills for the teachers of literacy. After the training, the teachers adjusted their schemes of work and lesson plans by incorporating more learning activities, appropriate instructional materials, new strategies of conducting CA. The CCP was implemented for six months and monitored through class/lesson observation, review of pupil's exercise books (NCCD, 2006) and interview with teachers and pupils. Teachers kept a research journal for documenting their own practice (Zeni, 1998), for reflection-on-action (Leitch & Day, 2000) and improvement of classroom practices. The qualitative data were analysed through Atlas.ti software and they are presented and discussed below.

### **3.5. Findings**

In this section, we report our findings on two issues: the experiences of the teachers in using CCP for teaching reading and writing in local language; and how the use of CCP has facilitated the children in learning to read and write in a local language.

#### **3.5.1. Teachers experiences in using the child-centred pedagogy**

The teachers shared experiences during follow-up interviews on the use of CCP and revealed that generally teaching was easier and lighter. One teacher said:

The innovation is so good. The pupils were able to participate actively, generate the content of the lesson and learn. When I put them in groups they share ideas together and those who are fast in grasping the concepts teach the other pupils. They were so interested in group work (Sarah, 2013).

Another teacher related her experience of using the CCP to the activities and learning materials that she used in teaching reading and writing:

I enjoy being with them when there are many activities. I involve them and make fun. When you teach them well, they understand but if you don't teach them well, sometimes they get bored. You need a lot of planned activities that will challenge them and also a lot of learning materials to help them grasp the new concept and link it to the old (Stella, 2013).

The follow-up interview with the teachers after class observation gradually brought in positive change in attitude towards paying attention to individual learners

as compared to when the study started. The teachers confessed that the use of CCP has helped them to be keen on what the pupils go through in the teaching and learning process. One teacher recounted her experience:

Teaching in local language is so interesting. It helps to create good relationship between teacher and pupils. I am able to know who is following the lesson and who is not following. The pupils are active and are able to answer questions since they are using their own mother tongue. It also makes the children build the interest of coming to school all the time because they know that what is going to be taught in class is not strange to them (Teddy, 2013).

Implementing the CCP has gradually helped the teachers to reflect on their teaching practice. One teacher reported:

From the beginning it was not easy because I thought that when they are in grade four, they should switch to English straight away without using the local language any more. I really fidgeted with them because I wanted them to learn and speak English. But I started changing because I realised that I should go slowly with them by involving them more in the learning process (Annet, 2013).

In the course of sharing experiences on using CCP, two challenges emerged: lack of reading materials and the difficulty of doing continuous assessment (CA) on a daily basis. The causes were varied but a prominent one was the high enrolment of pupils. Most classes had between 97 and 105 pupils. On the lack of reading materials, a teacher recounted:

With the big enrolment, there is the challenge of using or sharing the few reading materials that was provided for by the Ministry of Education. Children learn better when they have something in their hands to read. They do not know how to share a book (Tolit, 2013).

On the challenge of managing CA, another teacher said, 'I personally cannot handle children alone in the classroom. They are so many for me. They are about 92. How can I assess them individually on a daily basis objectively?' (Paula, 2013).

In one feedback meeting, the teachers discussed the two challenges in groups and made proposals. For the reading materials they proposed and agreed that teachers of grades one and two would make the pupils tell the stories and they write them out for them, while the pupils of grades three and four would write the stories and the teachers would improve on them. The teachers and pupils set to writing the stories and as this report is being shared, the stories have been published and are being used in the classroom. The detailed report on the writing exercise will be documented elsewhere.

The second proposal was to have plans for managing CA: assessing learners according to their seating arrangement and in small groups. Each teacher chose a plan that she taught was appropriate for her class taking into account the number of pupils. During another feedback meeting, the teachers gave a report on how they managed CA. A class teacher of 97 pupils reported that she assessed learners according to their seating arrangement. In this approach, she started with the pupils on the first desk and then moved on to the next child. At the end of the lesson, she took note of where she had stopped. She picked up from where she had stopped in



the next lesson. This made it possible for her to assess all the pupils in the class at least once in a week.

Four other teachers on the other hand divided the pupils into small groups of ten and based the assessment at group level. In this approach they were able to assess the whole class in each lesson. It was, however, observed that with the second approach the individual pupil's reading and writing needs were not adequately attended to. The teachers relied on the participation and responses of the dominating members of the group to draw conclusions on the competencies achieved. Four other teachers also divided the children into groups of ten but assessed them individually within the group both in reading and writing. One teacher reported:

I am doing individual assessment in a class of 76 pupils. I have divided them in groups of ten. I call them one by one to read and write and I record. I assess ten in each lesson and ten on the next day. This has worked quite well for me (Caroline, 2013).

In two schools, the instructional materials prepared were destroyed and the teachers had to make others. A teacher expressed her disappointment:

Sometimes we draw pictures and write letters and display on the wall but then sometimes other pupils come and remove them from the classroom. When you come back the next day, they are nowhere to be seen and then you have to make another one. It is discouraging and it takes up the time for teaching because you have to prepare another one (Hellen, 2013).

During the class observation, it was noted that the charts that were used for teaching and learning on the previous day were missing. The charts that remained on the wall had additional writing on them that did not relate to the theme covered in that particular lesson. Most of the charts were old and the writings were fading away. Coupled to that most of the charts displayed in grade one to three classrooms were provided by the Ministry of Education and were labelled in English. This denied the child the supporting environment for further learning in the local language.

### **3.5.2. Children's learning to read and write in local language**

As the teachers implemented CCP, lesson/class observation was done purposely to see what goes on in class in relation to children's learning to read and write in the local language. In a class of 97, pupils enjoyed the lesson and their participation was manifested by show of hands and by their willingness to move and pick picture cards to read and match them with writings on the chalkboard. Out of 10 pupils who picked the flash cards, 7 of them read the words correctly and matched them with pictures on a chart.

During the class observation in grade three, 15 pupils participated in reading as individuals, 9 of them read well by pointing at each syllable in a word, while 6 of them had difficulties in reading. This was reflected by pupils' hesitation or silence while pointing at words before reading them. Three of them individually pointed at a word but articulated another word that they had heard being read earlier. The mismatch between pointing at a word and actually articulating it triggered reactions from other pupils. They murmured in disapproval that their colleagues had read some words wrongly. The teacher responded by encouraging the pupil to point at each syllable as they read them loud and clear. If they did not succeed, another pupil was asked to read. The children's reaction was an indication that learning was taking

place, though at different levels and at the same time it showed their commitment towards learning through self and peer assessments. The more proficient pupils however took on a supportive position by prompting the less proficient pupils in reading by whispering from the background.

Pupils of grade two and three participated in class discussion based on a story they read in class in groups of ten and as individuals. Participation was reflected by raising hands, responding to question and listening to another pupil responding to the questions. In grade three pupils murmured in the background to dispute wrong answers but whispered as they offered correct answers while others smiled or nodded in approval of the correct answers. When the teacher was explaining a concept they focused attention on her, though a few of them were attentive for a short time. That explains why from time to time the teacher had to intone a song as an interlude or ask them to stand and do some exercises to awaken them and help them to refocus their attention to the learning.

In classes where pictures were displayed, pupils read on their own especially during break time, lunch hours or when the teachers were out of class. In grade two, 23 out of 97 pupils remained in class during morning break and randomly formed groups of threes and fives and identified charts. They took turns in reading to each other. There was a pupil who took the lead in reading and also helping those who had difficulties with one or two words. This was made possible because of the rich classroom environment which facilitated incidental learning.

There were other groups of pupils reciting the syllables by heart. When another pupil pointed at isolated syllables randomly, for example: li, la, lo, le, lu, only 6 out of 12 pupils could read them well. This was an indication of cram work which is typical of the teacher-centred approach. The fact that the pupils take initiative to

read and learn from the instructional materials displayed in their class emphasises the importance of continuous development and use of instructional materials to promote active learning, incidental learning and continuous generation of knowledge.

The findings from the review of exercise books showed improvement in proficiency in writing. Fifty out of 93 pupils in grade three could make differences between upper and lower cases that was challenging to them six months before the start of implementing the CCP. Thirty of the pupil however had challenges in writing letters that were written both on and below the line. For example: y, g, p, j, s and w. When the letters were in the lower cases, the pupils wrote them either as upper cases or on the line even if they were to be partly written below the line.

In grade three, 70 out of 93 pupils were able to space the letters and words correctly though 23 of them found difficulties in letter and word spacing. This created challenges for both the pupils and teachers when it came to reading and making meaning out of them. Sometimes the meaning was completely changed or the word did not make sense at all. On average the pupils could spell some words correctly though others had difficulties in spelling words of three syllables and above. The spelling difficulties manifested themselves in the work they copied from the chalkboard, in the free responses they made and in spelling their names.

In grade three and four, hardly any pupil used punctuation marks and if they did, it was incorrectly done. The teachers, however, marked wrongly punctuated sentences as right: an act encouraging pupils not to take punctuations seriously and yet the use of punctuations play great roles in determining the meaning that is conveyed.

During lesson observation in grade two the pupils named real objects shown by the teacher. For example, in that particular lesson the topic was on the foods eaten at home. The teacher brought sweet potatoes, egg plants, maize and groundnuts. The 12 pupils who put up their hands, named the foods presented easily and even named others that the teacher had not brought in class. The teacher wrote the words on the board and they read them in small groups and as individuals. Of the 10 pupils who participated in the individual reading, 8 of them pointed at each word and read them loud and clear. The teacher later on asked them to construct sentences using the words written on the board. Individual pupils were able to construct a variety of sentences following a given structure that required pupils to fill in the missing word. For instance: ‘An amaro bango ... ki...’ (I love eating ... and ...). The pupil’s construction: ‘An amaro bango layata ki odii pul’. (I love eating potatoes and groundnuts paste. Two pupils however, created new sentence patterns that the teacher had not given them. One of them said: ‘Bango layata ki odii pul mit caa angwen’. (It is nice to eat sweet potatoes and groundnuts paste at ten o’clock). This demonstrated elements of creativity through generating a new complex sentence pattern. This new sentence pattern was more exciting to the pupils than the one the teacher had given. The use of real objects made the learning experience more exciting and memorable for the learner. We, however, observed that the real objects were taken away from class after the lesson. This denied the children the chance of going back on their own to study the objects and learn more about them.

### **3.6. Discussion**

The implementation of the CCP for teaching reading and writing in the lower primary classes within PAR framework, showed some positive outcomes and also areas of weaknesses that the teachers need to focus on in the next phase of the study

in order to be able to guide children in learning reading and writing. In all three schools, the nature/level of children's participation in the learning process were characterised by responding to questions asked by the teacher in one word or a phrase or by a 'yes' or 'no' answer. In other occasions, participation was in the form of storytelling, and individual or group reading. These occasions of participation however were prompted by a question or a request from the teacher to a child to perform a task, making the teacher still maintain centre stage in the teaching and learning process. This is contrary to the philosophy of the CCP in which the child is to be at the centre of the learning process in order to influence the direction of learning (NCDC, 2006). In the CCP, the teacher is to play the role of a facilitator by structuring learners own discovery and search of knowledge (Altinyelken, Moorcroft & van der Draai, 2014).

Pupils, however, had moments when they took initiative to read the charts displayed in their classrooms in the local language. Some of them asked questions that initiated interaction among them and some peers helped the others who did not know how to read the writings on the charts. This brings in Vygotsky's point on scaffolding that is done between peers or the more knowledgeable one in order to stimulate the mind of the struggling learners to pick up and continue on their own. The charts displayed were effective since their contents were familiar, realistic and depicted a single activity (Hawthorne & Tomlinson, 1997). They helped learners to associate new information to concepts they had already learnt more efficiently than they could if using just words alone (Oxford & Crookall, 1990).

Much as there were charts displayed in some classes, they were old and some of the writings on them had faded. The old charts denied the children the opportunity to relate new concepts to visual aids. This practice does not support the

successful implementation of the CCP that is partly hinged on the use of instructional materials to help the pupils see and relate the abstract or new concepts to real life situations (NCCD, 2006). The teachers are therefore encouraged to prepare new and appropriate instructional materials on regular basis in order to provide an environment that motivates learning.

The NCCD (2006) recommended the conduct of CA on a daily basis. This is a very brilliant recommendation but experience from the study showed that continuous assessment on daily basis is not practical because of the high teacher: pupil ratio of 1: 95 on average. The teachers, however, during a research feedback session proposed and agreed to assess children individually and in groups. Though the group assessment has helped teachers to assess children at least once a week, it however gives false pictures of the competencies attained in each lesson by the child since it relies on group performances. More so, it does not take care of the individual learner differences.

Implementing the CCP within the PAR has contributed to teachers' change of attitude towards their teaching practices. They are able to record, reflect and share the experiences they go through as they teach. The shared experiences have led them to write reading materials with the children. The collaborative efforts among the teachers and pupils put the teachers as researchers into their own practice in order to improve it (Burton & Bartlett, 2005) and also gave the pupils occasions of participating in research.

### **3.7. Conclusion**

The implementation of CCP for teaching reading and writing in the local language 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. In order for this positive trend 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. Much as there was improvement, the children still have some weaknesses in constructing simple sentences, developing paragraphs and using punctuations correctly. Therefore, there is need for continued implementing of CCP in the next phase of the study with focus on the areas of weaknesses with particular attention being paid to individual assessment.

### **3.8. Implication of the study for policy and practice**

During the implementation of the child-centred pedagogy, the teachers worked in collaboration with fellow teachers in teaching children reading and writing. The spirit of collegiality that was cultivated during the study has contributed not only to positive change in attitude towards the use of local language as a MoI but also to a shift from merely lamenting over the lack of instructional materials to actually working with the children to write children's stories. It is evident from this study that for teachers to be change agents, they do not only need to work as a team in identifying the challenges that affect their teaching practices and children's learning but also to work collaboratively, creatively and continuously in coming up with a lasting solution to identified challenges that affect their teaching practices.

The study also revealed that in order for the implementation of the child-centred pedagogy to be successfully, a number of issues needed to be taken care of. For example, the number of learners in each class should range from 40 – 50 pupils, otherwise numbers of children more than that create challenges in daily assessment



and in involving learners in the learning activities. Secondly, there is need to provide instructional materials in form of reading texts in the local language as a means of reinforcing children's learning. For the instructional materials, the teachers need to design learning materials and activities that promote children's interaction and participation.

‘Formative assessment is not a final, but should give students and teachers interim feedback about where the student is at’

Alice Mercer in Education Week Teacher

## **Chapter 4**

# **Formative Assessment: the role of Participatory Action Research in blending policy and practice in Uganda<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup>The article has been published as: Lucy Dora Akello and M. C. Greetje Timmerman. 2017. Formative Assessment: the role of Participatory Action Research in blending policy and practice in Uganda. Educational Action Research, DOI: 10.1080/09650792.2017.1405831

## **Abstract**

This paper documents teachers' assessment practices and pupils' learning to read and write in large classes. To gain insights into the assessment practices and pupils' learning, the principles of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and participatory action research (PAR) design were adopted. Collaboratively, teachers reflected on their assessment practices, developed, implemented and monitored the assessment practices. Through observation, in-depth interview and review of exercise books, data was obtained. We argue that teachers' involvement in participatory action research has contributed to changing assessment practices in large classes and in improving pupils' competencies in reading and writing. On the other hand to promote better assessment practices, we advocate for reduced number of pupils in a class and teachers' workload to enable them offer more support to the pupils during assessment of reading and writing.

**Key words:** Formative assessment; policy; practice; large classes; feedback; Participatory Action Research

#### **4.0. Introduction**

This paper reports part of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study conducted in Uganda from 2012 to 2014. The study focussed on the use of local language as medium of instruction for teaching reading and writing. In order to understand why pupils who were being taught in the local language had difficulties in reading and writing, a preliminary investigation into the experiences of the teachers in using local language as medium of instruction was conducted in six primary schools. The preliminary finding was guided by Eileen's (2000) action research model. This model has five phases of inquiry namely: problem identification, gathering data, interpreting data, acting on evidence and evaluating results. In order to identify the problems, data was gathered through in-depth interview, focus group discussion, lesson observation, and review of pupils' exercise books. The findings exposed a number of challenges that were presented to the research team (teachers, Centre Coordinating Tutors, District Education Officers, members of the Acholi Language Board and the researcher) during a one day feedback workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to help the participants reflect on the identified challenges, validate findings and through consensus select one challenge that they thought was affecting children's reading and writing and finally plan ways of addressing it. The general consensus was that the poor method of teaching that was teacher-centred was a major obstacle to pupils' learning to read and write. The research team therefore in collaboration agreed that in order to improve pupils' reading and writing there was need to re-emphasising the child-centred pedagogy (Akello & Timmerman, 2017). The adoption of child-centre pedagogy (CCP) would allow interaction and participation among teachers, pupils and their peers during the learning process. An action plan for the CCP was designed, implemented and

monitored from March – August, 2013 and evaluated in November, 2013 in the sampled schools. The outcome of implementing the CCP was reported in Akello, Timmerman & Namusis (2015).

During the evaluation of the CCP, it emerged that the difficulty of assessing children's competencies in large classes and the lack of instructional materials were drawbacks to the successful implementation of CCP. In order to cater for the lack of instructional materials, six teachers of local language out of twelve were to work with the researcher and the pupils to write stories. In order to improve the assessment practices, it emerged that the teachers were to assess the pupils daily and share their experiences of assessment practices with fellow teachers during feedback meetings. The sharing of experiences was made possible through their involvement in Participatory Action Research (PAR) since it was envisaged that participating in action research would create an environment for them to reflect on the assessment practices, identify the challenges of assessment in large classes and to re-design the assessment plan for the next phase of the study.

Being aware of the challenges within the context in which the pupils were learning as well as the importance assessment adds to pupils' learning, it was imperative to understand the teachers' practices and challenges of assessment and to devise ways of improving it. This paper therefore documents the teachers' assessment practices and children's learning in large classes.

#### **4.1. Background: what is assessment?**

Assessment in the education system is an important practice for tracking and supporting learning. Assessment has been defined in various ways. The word 'assessment' from the Latin verb 'assidere' means 'to sit beside' [sic]. The image of someone sitting beside a learner portrays assessment as support for learning rather

than as a test of performance (Swaffield, 2011). The 'sitting beside' [sic] form of assessment is a natural part of many teachers' practices. In supporting pupils learning, teachers take close interest in what pupils say, write and do, as these give indicators of how pupils think about and understand what they are learning. This awareness of pupils' learning state helps the teachers to judge the appropriate next step and plan how best to guide further learning (Swaffield, 2011). According to Marshall and Drummond (2006) assessment is a process of teachers looking at pupils learning, striving to understand it, and using that knowledge in the interests of the pupils. Borrowing from Marshall and Drummond, assessment in this study is a process of teachers looking at pupils' learning, striving to understand it, and using that knowledge to support pupils' learning. Pupils' learning can be supported through diagnostic, formative and summative assessment. This paper focusses on formative assessment.

#### **4.1.1. Types of assessment**

Summative assessment centres on pupils level of achievement (Sadler, 1998) which can be used to accredit their knowledge development to a particular programme of study (Biggs, 2003). McTighe and O'Connor (2005, 10) argue that although through summative assessment learners are given feedback, the feedback is an insufficient tool for maximising learning since it comes at the end of a teaching period. Diagnostic assessment on the other hand is used by teachers to check learner's knowledge and level of skill, to identify learner's misconceptions, profile learner's interest, and reveal learning-style preferences. Diagnostic assessments provide information that assist teachers' planning and guide differentiated instruction (McTighe & O'Connor 2005, 10). The results obtained from diagnostic assessment feed into formative assessment plans.

Formative assessment (FA) is an ongoing, dynamic, and progressive process that elicits verbal and non-verbal information from pupils about the progress of their learning (Buck & Trauth-Nare, 2009; Pryor & Crossouard, 2008; 2003). Black and William (2004) argue that giving weekly tests and telling pupils their marks, does not constitute formative assessment. They emphasised that unless some learning action follows from the outcomes, that practice is merely frequent summative assessment.

#### **4.1.2. Formative assessment and feedback**

Formative assessment is assumed to facilitate appropriate feedback and corrective action on the part of teachers. For instance, it would enable teachers to identify individual pupil's problems and provide adequate help in rectifying the identified problems (National Curriculum development Centre [NCDC], 2008) so that the pupil would catch up with the rest of the class. Likewise, high achievers could be identified and given more challenging tasks to stimulate their learning (NCDC, 2006). Ultimately, feedback for the pupils could provoke further questioning and learning; while for the teacher feedback could be used for planning lessons and improving instruction.

According to Swarffield (2011) the feedback provided to the pupils should highlight quality in their work, point out where the work could be improved and crucially, give clear and explicit guidance on how to make the improvement. This is because feedback encourages pupils to develop understanding of what and how they are learning, to recognise and value achievement, and to take responsibility for directing and regulating their own learning. Walker (2009) and Rust (2002), however, argue that though feedback is meant to improve learning, often some pupils seem not to use comments on assessed work as resources for learning. They suggest that useful feedback for pupils needs to be prompt and timely.



Weaver (2006, 2) stressed that feedback comments and the language used for conveying feedback are important in determining whether or not pupils use feedback. The content of usable feedback should highlight what has been done and/or not done (Light & Cox, 2001; Walker, 2009), and how well things have been done. It should offer motivating suggestions that would lead to improvement (Walker, 2009), and recommend resources that would stimulate learning. The feedback appropriate for pupils in lower classes would, in addition to written feedback, include verbal comments, clapping hands and choral chants. To understand the assessment practices in Uganda, let us look at the language policy and the thematic curriculum.

#### **4.1.3. Language Policy in Uganda**

The 1992 Education Review report stipulated that, schools, save for some in urban areas, should teach all subjects, except English, through mother tongues from grade one to three. Every school is to adopt the dominant language of the community it is situated in as a medium of instruction or may retain English only if the dominant community language is unclear. English becomes the medium of instruction from grade four onwards (Government of Uganda, 1992). This language policy was implemented between 2000 and 2002, but the implementers did not pay sufficient attention to listening, speaking, reading and writing in the first three years of primary school (Penny, *et al.*, 2008). This badly implemented literacy programs resulted into a decline in reading and writing skills (Draku, 2011; Penny, *et al.*, 2008), therefore necessitating a curriculum review in 2004. The reviewed curriculum recommended the implementation of the thematic curriculum in 2007 (Acana, *et al.*, 2010; NCDC, 2006).

#### **4.1.4. The Thematic Curriculum**

The thematic curriculum is taught in local languages from grade one to three mainly to help pupils improve their level of proficiency in reading and writing. The thematic curriculum emphasises the development of concepts and mastery of skills in teaching and learning (NCDC, 2012) and a shift from summative to formative assessment. This shift in assessment practice was proposed with the hope that improvements in classroom assessment would contribute to the improvement of pupils' learning (NCDC, 2006; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & William, 2004).

#### **4.1.5. Assessment Policy in Uganda**

The policy on assessment stipulated that assessment should be done during lessons as pupils perform daily tasks, at the end-of-theme and end-of-term. Teachers were to keep records of each child's assessment for purposes of identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses and assessment was to be cumulative for purposes of tracking progress or regression in the child's learning (NCDC, 2006, 12).

Pupils' competencies were to be assessed through reviewing their exercise books, marking their handwriting, observing and listening to them in class (NCDC, 2006, 12; Akyeampong, Pryor & Ampiah, 2006). The focus of assessment was to help pupils engage in interaction and generate knowledge rather than test what they know (Pryor & Crossouard, 2008). Teachers were therefore urged to incorporate formative assessment into their classroom practices much more explicitly and consciously (NCDC, 2006) than they did before the introduction of the thematic curriculum.

The policy on assessment elaborated above, however, met with resistance from teachers generally. The teachers claimed they were overloaded with work due to high pupil enrolment of between 98 – 145 per class and other school duties that demand their attention. The high pupils' enrolment made it impractical to carry out

daily assess in large classes. Aware of the importance of assessment in promoting learning, it was therefore important to undertake this study. The study set out to answer two questions: 1) How has assessment been implemented in large classes during reading and writing lessons? 2) How has participation in action research changed assessment practices in the large classes and contributed to pupils' learning to read and write?

#### **4.2. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development**

The study adopted Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD describes the actual level of development of the learner and the next level of potential development that a learner can attain through the help of the teacher or other capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). The principle is that individuals can learn and internalize concepts and skills when working in collaboration with peers and more skilled persons. According to Nordlof (2014) learning through collaboration enables pupils to gradually attain a state of competence in which they could complete a similar task independently and pick on another task that is slightly difficult.

Adopting the ZPD for this study was appropriate since formative assessment is a dynamic process in which supportive adults or peers help pupils to move from what they already know to what they are able to do next (Shepard, 2005, 66). This means that after completing the task jointly, the learner would likely be able to complete the same task independently the next time (Vygotsky, 1978), and through that process, the learner's ZPD for that particular task would have been raised. This process is repeated at the higher level of task difficulty that the learner's new ZPD requires. The learner's ZPD is assessed through observation and interaction between teachers and learners during the learning process.

During assessment, a range of activities that pupils could accomplish in collaboration with the teacher or other peers, but could not accomplish independently, were provided. For example, assessment was done at group and individual levels and that provided occasions for more capable peers to give hints to their less capable peers to learn. Through questioning, interaction and participating in group and individual tasks, the pupils were helped to learn and solve problems with their peers and on their own. Teachers facilitated pupils' learning by beginning teaching with concepts they already knew and moving to presenting new concepts; through remedial exercises and by giving verbal and written feedback.

### **4.3. Methodology**

#### **4.3.1. Participatory Action Research.**

The study adopted a participatory action research (PAR) design. PAR is a highly collaborative process between expert researchers and the members of the organisation under study (Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy, 1993). PAR focuses on bringing change, actively engaging all people within a community to work towards this change (Chatterton, Fuller & Routledge, 2007). The goal of PAR is to enhance teaching practices, increase teachers' awareness of decision making regarding their own practice, and improve the conditions in which they work (Whitehead, 2000). When teachers are engaged in professional development, they learn best from other teachers, and their problem solving and creativity are enhanced by diverse groupings (Mitchell, Reilly & Logue, 2009). PAR emphasises teamwork and active collaboration, where researchers and participants work together to analyse a problem situation and generate actions to solve the problem (Chatterton, Fuller & Routledge, 2007). The collaborative nature of PAR was important in this study as it provided physical space for the research team to work collaboratively with each other

in the learning environment not only in identifying and reflecting on the challenges of implementing assessment daily in large classes, but also in developing assessment plans, implementing and monitoring them.

#### **4.3.2. Participants**

The six teachers and 720 pupils from three primary schools were purposively selected. Through their participation and input, the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the designed assessment plans in promoting learning was established. The six teachers and the researcher collaborated in implementing the assessment plans and in identifying pupils' challenges in reading and writing in large classes. The teachers' documentation of the assessment practices, the participant observations and review of pupils' exercise books provided data for this study.

#### **4.3.3. Assessment plans**

In order to improve pupils' competencies in reading and writing in large classes, the teachers and the researcher during an evaluation feedback workshop agreed to design an assessment plan that was implemented and monitored for three months from the beginning of February to April, 2014 (see Table 1). In those classes, pupils with different abilities were mixed up in order to create opportunities for the more competent pupils to offer support and guidance to the less competent ones. That was in line with the principles of the ZPD in which the adult or more competent peers offer support to the less competent peers to help them attain their next level of potential development (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Table 1: Formative Assessment Plans one in Schools A and B**

School	Grade	Total per class	No. per group	No. of groups	Activities	Actors	Duration of assessment	Tool/method of assessment	Duration of implementation & monitoring	Time for evaluation
<b>A</b>	1	145	23	06	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	30 minutes	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months	After three months
	3	116	20	06	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	30 minutes	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months	After three months
	4	121	28	05	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	40 minutes	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months	After three months
<b>B</b>	1	120	28	05	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	30 minutes	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months	After three months
	2	098	27	04	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	30 minutes	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months	After three months
	4	120	30	04	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	40 minutes	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months	After three months

As the teachers and researcher implemented assessment plan one (1), they monitored and reflected on the assessment of reading and writing for three months. During these phases, data on the process of formative assessment and pupils' learning was gathered through observation and document review and was presented to the research team during a one day feedback workshop. The teachers, for instance, reported that it was difficult to assess individual pupil's progress when assessing them at group level since the competencies gained was based on group performances. They also reported that assessing pupils at group level denied the less competent pupils chances of participating and learning in the process. In order to establish individual competencies and help the less competent pupils to participate and learn, the research team in collaboration agreed to revise the assessment plan (see Table 2). In the revised plan, the number of pupils per group reduced while the number of groups increased. This was anticipated to provide more chances for pupils to participate in the learning process and receive more support from teachers and their peers compared to when they were many in a group.

In the revised assessment plan two (2), the teachers assessed pupils individually within a group and only moved to the next group when all the pupils in one group had been assessed. The duration of assessment varied from one class to another and it depended on the teacher's competencies in assessment and the pupils' ability to learn. The teachers continued with marking books, giving feedback, giving remedial lessons and keeping records of competencies gained. These practices were in line with the guidelines stipulated in the assessment policy (NCDC, 2006, 12). Due to the cyclical nature of action research (McTaggart, 1991), it was not possible in practice to anticipate everything that needed to be done and so it was left to the discretion of each teacher to decide how many pupils he/she would have in a group

and when he/she would conduct remedial lessons. The choice of the group size depended on the different classroom contexts and the teacher's ability to manage group activities. The assessment at the end-of-theme and end-of-term of study was to continue, though the focus in this paper was on daily assessment during class time. The teachers and the other participants monitored and documented the daily assessment practices.



**Table 2: Revised Formative Assessment Plans two in Schools A and B**

School	Grade	Total per class	No. per group	No. of groups	Activities	Actors	Duration of assessment	Assessing the whole class	Tool/method of assessment	Duration of implementation & monitoring
<b>A</b>	1	145	10	12	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	30 minutes	15 days	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months
	3	116	10 & 11	11	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	30 minutes	23 days	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months
	4	121	10 & 11	14	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	40 minutes	20 days	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months
<b>B</b>	1	120	10	12	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	30 minutes	14 days	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months
	2	098	05	19	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	30 minutes	03 days	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months
	4	120	38	03	Reading writing	Teachers, researcher	40 minutes	21 days	Lesson observation, review of exercise books, marking	Three months

#### **4.3.4. Methods**

Data on daily assessment practices in large classes was collected through interview, participant observation and review of pupils' sampled exercise books for the last two terms (June – August 2013 and September – November 2013). Through interview, the teachers were able to share their experiences in assessing pupils daily in large classes and also to propose possible ways of improving it; while through participant observation the researcher was able to observe the teachers and pupils directly during the assessment process (Kothari and Gaurav, 2015; Silverman, 2013; Flick, 2012; Yin, 2003) instead of relying solely on their explanations of assessment practices and the challenges they go through (Paterson, Bottorff & Hewatt, 2003) and obtain data that supplemented the interview and review of exercise book. The review of sampled exercise books helped the teachers and researcher not only to access pupils' original work in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses in writing, but also to access the kind of written feedback that pupils received from the teachers. The review of books focussed on shaping letters, writing lower and upper case letters, spacing letters, and word, using punctuations, sentence construction and written feedback. The data obtained helped the research team to plan for phase one of assessment in large classes which was implemented from February to April, 2014.

Between February and April, 2014, the books of pupils in grade one to three were marked and reviewed by teachers alone, while in grade four, both the teachers and pupils marked books guided by a marking scheme. Marking exposed the strengths and weaknesses of the pupils in writing. There were, however, gap in information from the exercise books reviewed since some of the books sampled had incomplete exercises, while some of the pupils had not done the exercises and some

others had had unmarked exercises. Nevertheless, the gap in information on pupils' writing was filled in by sampling more exercise books for review.

Through participant observation we gained insight into the pupils' interaction with their teachers and peers. The focus of observation was on classroom organisation, teacher and pupils activities, the level of interaction, teacher and peer verbal feedback, and classroom management. The choice of participant observation helped the researcher to observe the classroom practices as it was instead of relying solely on the teachers' explanation. The teachers and researcher also observed and listened to the pupils as they participated in class activities. The focus of listening was on articulation of sounds, syllables, words, sentences and feedback. The pupils gave varied feedback - clapping hands, praising, singing and choral chanting - immediately either to affirm or disapprove the tasks performed. Sometimes the pupils murmured in disapproval but frequently whispered the correct responses to the pupil who was reading.

The teachers participated in in-depth interviews. Through the interview, we gained insight into the teachers' experiences of formative assessment and pupils' learning in large classes. Through in-depth interview, observation, listening, marking and reviewing exercise books, the teachers got feedback that did not only help them to know the actual level of pupils' attainment, but also to adjust assessment activities that supported pupils' learning to the next level of potential development. The qualitative data obtained were analysed through Atlas.ti software and two main themes emerged, namely: teachers' assessment practices in large classes and how teachers' participation in action research has changed assessment practices in large classes and promoted pupils' learning to read and write.

#### **4.4. Findings**

This section presents the findings on the teachers' assessment practices in large classes and on how teachers' participation in action research has changed assessment practices and promoted pupils' learning to read and write.

##### **4.4.1. Practice of assessment in large classes**

This section reports the assessment practices of six teachers before they revised the assessment plan. In line with the assessment policy in lower primary (NCDC, 2006), teachers are to assess pupils' competencies daily, at the end-of-theme and at the end-of-term; to mark pupils' books and give feedback on competencies gained daily. In order to understand how assessment was carried out, lessons were observed and teachers were asked to explain how they assessed the pupils. Pupils' books were also checked to establish whether or not they were marked and if meaningful written feedback was given. To establish pupils' strengths and weaknesses in reading and writing and also to check the frequency of assessment, daily records of pupils' competencies were request for. The outcome of the inquiry illustrated that the teachers carried out assessment at three different levels as presented below:

##### **4.4.2. Assessing on daily basis**

This is the assessment in which teachers are to assess all the children together as a class during reading and writing. The assessment is conducted through a number of activities like reading at individual and group levels, matching words to pictures, filling in the missing gap with a word and drawing pictures to illustrate a concept. Through observation, it was apparent that some learning took place, although the teachers noted that it was not easy to identify the specific challenges of

each child in reading and writing since some of them were overshadowed by the active and dominating peers. A teacher shared her experiences:

Assessment of pupils in every lesson can work for a small class; it does not work well in large classes. It is not possible to assess 121 pupils in a lesson of 30 minutes objectively and identify their strengths and weaknesses. Assessment at the end of a theme and at the end of the term works quite well (Sarah, Gulu August 21, 2014).

Four of the teachers reported that they did daily assessment although they encountered some challenges. One of them shared her experience:

We tried to assess the children but ended up looking at the general performance of the class since we could not assess a few of them and leave the majority unattended to. There are also other school duties that we have to accomplish and those increased our workload therefore making it hard to mark all the books and give feedback (Caroline, Gulu August 21, 2014).

To verify teachers' claim about the impracticability of assessing pupils daily, lessons were observed and we confirmed that the teachers could only assess between 20-30 pupils in a class of between 90 to 120. In total, out of 720 pupils in six classes, only 156 of them were assessed in a day.

#### **4.4.3. Assessment at end-of-theme**

This is an assessment practice in which pupils are given test after completing one of the themes to be taught within a term. The end-of-theme test was rather easier to manage because the teachers had time for marking and planning for remedial

lessons. In grade one, the test at the end-of-theme focussed on handwriting, reading and filling in gaps with a missing word. The teachers in grade four had mid-term examinations and the pupils did homework. While it was noted that the teachers enjoyed end-of-theme assessment, they had different experiences in implementing daily assessment. A teacher of grade three shared her practice:

In my class though I enjoyed assessing 116 pupils at the end-of-theme and at the end-of-term; the daily assessment was not easy because of the high number of pupils in the class. When I tried to assess them on a daily basis, I realised I was deceiving myself and the pupils as well. It was not practical and it does not promote learning. If the number could be reduced to about half or ranging from 50 – 60, that would work (Helen, Gulu August 20, 2014).

#### **4.4.4. Feedback on assessment**

In accordance with the assessment policy pupils books are to be marked and feedback given as a means of pointing out the strengths and weaknesses. Through review of pupils' exercise books, we noted that in four classes about 20 - 40 out of 116 - 120 books were marked but the rest were left unmarked and so the pupils were denied feedback on their work. Failure to mark and give specific comments did not only make it hard for the teachers to identify the areas in which pupils had attained competencies and in which areas they needed support but also made it hard to plan for improvement of teaching reading and writing. Yet some scholars argue that useful feedback to pupils should be prompt and timely in order to ensure that important elements were not forgotten (Clynes & Raftery, 2008; Walker, 2009; Rust, 2002)

and that learning takes place. Swarffield (2011) stressed 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.

On the contrary the ratings of competencies attained in the end-of-theme and end-of-term assessment were in the form of general comments like, 'good', 'fair', 'poor', 'weak' and 'work hard'. Leahy, Lyon, Thompson and William (2005) argued that in order for assessment to be effective, feedback needs to cause thinking. Grades, scores and comments like "Good job" do not cause thinking. What *does* cause thinking is a comment that addresses what the student needs to do in order to improve. Timms, De Velle & Lay (2016) however, contend that much as feedback is provided in the form of text, some of which can be complex, a learner's reading and language skills can be very influential on his/her ability to decode the feedback. If the reading and language skills are insufficient to decode and extract the meaning from the feedback message, then putting the comments in action would be difficult.

#### **4.4.5. Record of competencies**

On keeping records of competencies attained, it was observed that four teachers made records of end-of-theme and end-of-term assessment in percentages, although there were no records on daily assessment. One teacher reported that keeping record for end-of-theme and end-of-term assessment was easy although she took a long time in identifying the problems of the pupils in a big class. As a follow-up on keeping records of competencies attained the teachers were asked why they did not have records on daily assessment. Generally from their responses it could be deduced that not all the teachers were conducting assessment daily. A teacher stated her position:

It is not practical to assess 120 pupils effectively on a daily basis, let alone taking records of pupils' competencies daily because of the big numbers in my class. If I tell you that I did it, I will be cheating you. The end-of-theme and end-of-term assessments are practical in large classes because we have time to mark their books and do correction in class with them before the end of another theme (Paska, Gulu August 21, 2014).

The lack of records on daily assessment is a practice contrary to that stipulated in the assessment policy (NCDC, 2006).

Overall, the teachers assessed pupils daily, at the end of the theme and at the end of the term, although daily assessment was not taken seriously. The failure of the teachers to assess pupils daily is a challenge to the assessment policy. Nevertheless, in order to improve daily assessment practices and promote pupils' learning to read and write, the teachers during a feedback meeting agreed and redesigned the assessment plan (see table 2) which they implemented from June to August, 2014.

#### ***4.5. Assessment within a participatory action research framework***

This section reports assessment practice of six teachers within a participatory action research framework from June to August, 2014.

##### **4.5.1. Assessing a group as a whole**

In the redesigned assessment plan, the teachers proposed that it was important to assess pupils at group levels and that each teacher was to decide on the number of pupils in each group. The group size depended on the number of pupils in a class and the teacher's ability to manage the groups. The number of pupils and the



number of assessment groups varied from one class to another. The teachers spent different number of days doing one round of assessment for the whole class. During the assessment processes, the teachers engaged the pupils in reading aloud, writing, responding to questions, matching word to phrase and discussion. A teacher of grade three shared how she grouped the pupils and assessed them.

I divided the pupils randomly into groups of 10, though six groups had eleven pupils. In a lesson of 30 minutes, I selected five pupils out of the ten and asked them one by one to read sentences written on the chalkboard. I also gave them written exercises in which they were required to fill in the missing word in each lesson. This assessment worked quite well because pupils were able to help each other in reading the written exercises and write correct answers. Where their peers could not help them I guided them accordingly. I could see them learning. I was even able to identify some of their individual strengths and weaknesses (Hellen, Gulu August 20, 2014).

The second teacher took a month to assess 121 pupils. In that class the pupils participated in reading as a whole class, reading at group level and reading individually. During the reading session, they identified a word or a sentence, read it and matched it with a similar word, and also matched a sentence with another similar sentence. During the individual reading, whenever a pupil had difficulties, either the teacher or the other pupils gave hints to the one reading on how to articulate the particular word. The overall performance showed that all the pupils

could read a one-syllable word; 40% could read two-syllable word and 20% could read a three-syllable word.

In another class, the teacher engaged the pupils in class activities like matching words to pictures, filling in the missing letter and using flash cards with the aim of assessing their competencies in spelling words and constructing sentences. Through matching words to pictures, between 60 – 70% of the pupils were able to match pictures to words and read well, while between 30 – 40% had difficulties in matching pictures to words. While filling in missing word between 40 – 50% identified missing letters and read them well, while 50 – 60% had difficulties in identifying missing letter like ‘p’ with figure ‘9’ and ‘b’ with ‘d’. The findings indicated that pupils performed better during matching words with picture, but had difficulties in identifying missing letters. In these particular cases they interchanged the letters and figure.

In assessing writing, the pupils of grade three participated in activities that required them to match a word to a phrase in order to form a sentence. Table 3 below is an illustration of the matching exercise.

**Table 3: Exercise on matching word to phrase**

<b>Word</b>	<b>Phrase</b>
Farmer	makes furniture
Teacher	grows crop
Carpenter	teaches pupils

In the next activity, the pupils were expected to fill in gaps with the correct word form. This was aimed at checking their ability to spell words and to construct grammatically correct sentences. In the example below, the pupils were expected to use the correct word form of ‘go’ to fill in the gap:

Okello ----- to town yesterday (go)

Other activities for checking their ability to spell words correctly and construct sentences correctly were the use of jumbled letters and sentences. An example of jumbled letters is 'enh'. This becomes 'hen' when written correctly.

In grade one class, lessons were observed three times in order to understand how a child's learning could be assessed through the various class activities. In the first lesson, the pupils participated in three activities: sorting letters, matching letters and joining dots. Through joining dots, the pupils learnt to shape letters. Through sorting and matching letters, the teacher wrote letters on the chalkboard and asked the pupils to pick a letter card, to look for a similar letter on the chalkboard and place the card next to it. This helped them to differentiate one letter from another. In the second lesson, the pupils participated in matching word to word, sorting pictures and matching picture to picture. In the third lesson, pupils participated in a drawing that required them to complete a missing part of a picture. Through these activities, pupils performed better in differentiating one letter from another, - a problem they had five months before - and in shaping letters. A teacher reported the progress made:

Reading in the second term focussed on learning letter names. 50% of the pupils could read the letter names, while 50% still had difficulties. In writing 80% could differentiate one letter from another, while 20% confused the letters b and d, and 'p' and figure '9'. We also did letter shaping. 70% of the pupils could shape the letters well while 30% scribbled shapes that could hardly be identified with any letter. The last area of assessment was on following lines while writing. In that activity 60% of

them could write the letters on the lines, while 40% wrote a mixture of letters across and above the lines (Stella, Gulu August 20, 2014).

In a class of 145, pupils participated in a number of activities such as singing letter names and using letter cards. Letter cards are cards with a letter written on it. In a previous lesson, they had learnt the letters 'a', 'b', 'c' and 'd'. On that particular day, they were learning the letter 'e'. The teacher made letter cards of 'a', 'b', 'c', 'd' and 'e' and gave them to five pupils. She asked the pupils: who has letter 'e'? The child with letter 'e' put up her hand and moved forward. Next, she asked: who has letter 'd'? The child who had it was hesitant but eventually put up his hand and came forward. The third child, who had letter 'b', could not identify the letter he was holding and so remained standing confused. The teacher asked the rest of the pupils to identify the child who had letter 'b'. They responded in chorus: 'Ocaya has letter b'. The teacher picked the letter card, showed it to Ocaya, and asked him to name it and he did. That was a lively activity for the pupils and each of them was eager to participate.

The second activity was singing a song that had a letter name. Engaging the pupils in singing a letter name was meant to motivate and tune them to learn and write the different letters of the alphabet. In one observed lesson, pupils were to learn writing letter 'c'. The teacher intoned the song and the pupils jumped up in excitement singing and demonstrating how to write letter 'c'. The song was repeated four times.

'C, c nen c caa

An ka acoyo c

Nen kit ma kicoyo kwede

Yomo cwinya mada.’

This is literally translated as:

C, c, look at c

When I write c

Look at how it is written

It makes me very happy.

Having assessed all the 145 pupils, the teacher came up with the overall assessment of the competencies gained. She had this to share:

In writing skill, I assessed them on six competencies and discovered that 40% of them could follow lines as they wrote, while the 60% wrote across the line, and others wrote across the pages. In shaping letters, 30% could shape the letters well, while 70% had difficulties with letter ‘p’. They wrote it as figure ‘9’. Others wrote letter ‘d’ as ‘b’. In spacing letter and words, 20% could space letters well and 10% can space one word from another well. The rest of the pupils merged everything. I also assessed them in writing lower and upper case letters. 40% wrote lower case letters well while 60% mix up lower and upper case letters; and 40% wrote upper case letters well, while 60% mixed up upper case and lower case letters (Paska, Gulu August 20, 2014).

In a class of 98 pupils, the teacher had five pupils per group and assessed 38 of them in a lesson of 30 minutes on competencies in writing. This involved copying written words and letter patterns from the chalkboard. The teacher reported:

In the next exercise on handwriting, I gave a simple pattern on letter B and five words composed from that letter [bin, bed, bila, bito, bolo].

The sentences composed were:

Betty bedo I Bobi (translated as 'Betty lives in Bobi').

Baba bino tin aa ki Bobi (My father will return from Bobi today).

The two sentences above illustrate that the pupils were capable of generating more complex sentences when given more time to practice.

Another teacher assessed pupils in reading and sentence construction and kept records for three weeks (see table 4). The records of competencies were analysed and the results showed gradual improvement in the competencies gained although three pupils maintained their scores at above average and by the third week only one pupil was below average. The detailed interpretation of the results for the score was as follows: pupils above average scored between 70 – 100%. These pupils were able to read one and two syllable words, read simple and complex sentences, construct simple sentences on their own and understand instruction and respond accordingly. Pupils whose scores were average obtained between 41 – 69%. These categories were able to read one syllable word, read simple sentences and short stories, could respond to instructions accordingly, but were not able to construct sentences on their own. The third category of pupils were below average with scores of between 0 – 40%. They had the following challenges: could not read a one syllable word, and were not able to read simple sentences and short stories. From the scores above, the teacher planned to continue assessing pupils at group levels and give feedback immediately.

On the whole, the teachers noted that though the pupils were progressing well in learning reading and writing, the whole exercise was very demanding and time consuming. They generally perceived daily assessment as additional responsibilities. One teacher explained her situation:

It was demanding to plan for teaching and remedial lesson daily. More still, marking books, keeping records of competencies gained and reflecting on the assessment results for planning purposes, are additional responsibilities. In real practice, I first assessed the whole class and then prepared remedial lesson for the few who were below average on a Friday evening. But for general class problems, I used the time for lesson on a Friday to conduct remedial (Sarah. Gulu August 20, 2014).

The delay in conducting remedial lessons until all the pupils have been assessed denied the pupils timely feedback that they would have used to improve their learning (Weaver, 2006) and slowed down the learning process.

#### ***4.6. Impact of teachers' participation in PAR on the assessment practices***

The policy on assessment highlights the following areas: intervals and frequency of assessment, record keeping and ways of assessing reading and writing. As we compared teachers' assessment practices before and after engaging in PAR we recognised that the assessment practices have improved. For instance, the teachers became keen in observing, reflecting and sharing their assessment practices with their peers in small groups and during the feedback workshop. Through the sharing they collectively reached moments of concrete decision that influenced the next phases of assessment. This is exhibited by the revision of the assessment plans 1 and 2 (see tables 1 and 2) in which the focus of assessment was changed from assessing

pupils at group levels to assessing the individual child within the group. One of the teachers shared:

It was difficult to assess individual pupil's progress within the group since the competencies gained are based on group performances. Assessing at group levels denied the less competent pupils the possibilities of participating and learning in the process. It is better to reduce the number and assess the individuals in the group (Helen, Gulu August 20, 2014)

Although the teachers initially were reluctant in carrying out assessment daily, gradually as they reflected and discussed with their peers on better ways of assessing, they realised that it was possible. A teacher in grade two reported:

I assessed pupils according to their seating arrangement and it worked quite well in my class. In this approach, I started with the pupils at the first desk and then moved on to the next child. At the end of the lesson, I took note of where I had stopped and picked up again from that child in the next lesson. In the course of assessing, I marked the books and gave feedback (Helen, Gulu August 20, 2014).



**Table 4: Record of competencies attained over three weeks**

Pupils	Week One		Week Two		Week Three		Overall performance	
	Total mark	Percentage	Total mark	Percentage	Total mark	Percentage	Total	Percentage
Pupil 1	12/15	<b>80</b>	10/12	<b>83</b>	10/12	<b>83</b>	32/39	82.0%
Pupil 2	8/15	<b>53</b>	7/12	<b>58</b>	6/12	<b>50</b>	21/39	53.7%
Pupil 3	5/15	<b>33</b>	6/12	<b>50</b>	6/12	<b>50</b>	17/39	44.3%
Pupil 4	5/15	<b>33</b>	4/12	<b>33</b>	7/12	<b>58</b>	16/39	41.3%
Pupil 5	14/15	<b>93</b>	10/12	<b>83</b>	10/12	<b>83</b>	34/39	86.3%
Pupil 6	5/15	<b>33</b>	5/12	<b>41</b>	6/12	<b>50</b>	16/39	41.3%
Pupil 7	12/15	<b>80</b>	11/12	<b>91</b>	10/12	<b>83</b>	33/39	84.7%
Pupil 8	5/15	<b>33</b>	4/12	<b>33</b>	6/12	<b>50</b>	15/39	38.7%
Pupil 9	6/15	<b>40</b>	4/12	<b>33</b>	4/12	<b>33</b>	14/39	35.3%
Pupil 10	5/15	<b>33</b>	5/12	<b>41</b>	8/12	<b>66</b>	18/39	46.7%

Key: 0 – 40% = below average, 41 – 69% = average, 70 – 100% above average

The teachers' participation in PAR has had some influence on the quality of feedback given to children. They got to know that a one-word written feedback had little impact on pupils' learning and if at all it had, then it was for those who knew how to read and interpret the feedback. They therefore engaged the pupils in verbal interaction in addition to the written feedback in order to facilitate children in understanding their weaknesses and also to encourage reflecting and correcting their work. The teachers improved quality of feedback was confirmed during observation of lessons. This practice is in line with the recommendation from NCDC (2006) that feedback for pupils should provoke further questioning and learning; while for the teacher, feedback should be used for planning lessons and improving instruction.

The teachers reported at the beginning of the study that it was challenging for them to keep records of pupils' competencies attained. Keeping records of competencies however increasingly became a cherished practice (see table 4) since it helped the teachers not only to track children's performances and to plan for improvement but also to give feedback to the children and parents.

#### **4.7. Conclusion**

The focus of this paper was on teachers' assessment practices in large classes and how 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 among themselves, 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 change and improvement in assessment practices in large classes has been made possible due to the teachers' participation in PAR and adoption of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Through PAR framework the teachers worked collaboration in identifying the challenges in their assessment 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.

In a nutshell therefore, working within PAR framework and adopting Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, the teachers collaborated with each other towards improving not only pupils learning to read and write but also in changing the assessment practices in large classes.

#### **4.8. Implication for policy and practice**

Assessment of learning is important for pupils to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses. This however is effective in small classes or when teachers work in collaboration with other teachers within the PAR framework. It is therefore important to engage teachers in action research in order to give them space to reflect on their

practices and to work in collaboration with each other to plan for improvement of children's learning and their own practices.

Secondly, interaction and feedback are very important for learning to take place and more so when it is given immediately in a language that the learner understands. It is therefore important that in addition to the written feedback, the teacher gives verbal feedback to help pupils understand their strengths and weaknesses in reading and writing.

“We must do more to distribute materials and books as widely and fairly as possible, so that all people – children above all – can read in the language of their choice, including in their mother tongue,”.

**Bokova Irina, Feb 21, 2013**

# **Chapter 5**

## **Children's stories: a tool for teaching reading and writing within a Participatory Action Research framework**

## **Abstract**

Learning to read and write is an important educational goal all over the world. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, it documents the practice of using written children's stories for teaching reading and writing in grades one to four in three primary schools in Northern Uganda. Secondly, it reports on how the written stories contributed to children's learning to read and write. The teachers, children and the researcher guided by Vygotsky's principles of socio-cultural theory, engaged in a participatory action research. Findings through class observation, interview and review of pupils' exercise books, revealed that the written stories contribute to improving children's writing and reading. However, the 'animal language', the humour, gesture and voice variations that were ingrained in the oral stories, did not feature in the written stories and this affected the beauty and meaning that came with the written stories. While we recommend the continued use of written children's stories for reinforcing reading and writing, we propose that the stories be accompanied with audio-visuals in order to maintain the humour, tone variations and 'animal language'.

Key words: Children's stories, reading, writing, Participatory Action Research

## **5.0 Introduction**

The study was conducted in three rural primary schools in Gulu and Amuru districts in Northern Uganda during a period when Northern Uganda was recovering from the 25 years of civil war led by the Lord's Resistant Army (LRA). As a consequence of the civil war, a number of schools were abandoned, the infrastructures were destroyed, and the instructional materials were either vandalised or destroyed (UNESCO, 2011; McCormac & Benjamin, 2008). After the civil war, the Government of Uganda embarked on the renovating of school and restocking of the instructional materials in phases but the facilities and in particular the reading materials were not adequate.

Apart from Government efforts to develop instructional materials, Literacy and Adult Basic Education (LABE) also developed and printed sets of story books in five local languages, namely: Aringa, Kakwa, Madi, Lugbara and Acholi. The main challenge however is that while the story books were only intended to be sample and supplementary materials, in the absence of other reading and instructional materials for learners in primary one to three, the books became the only reading texts for children and adults (Heugh and Mathias, 2013). The scarcity of reading materials has resulted into children learning to recite stories off by heart rather than learning to read (Akello & Timmerman, 2017; Akello, Timmerman & Namusisi, 2015; Heugh and Mathias, 2014; 2013; Chatry-Komerek, 2003).

The need for developing instructional materials to support children in learning reading and writing first emerged in 2012 during a preliminary study that was intended to establish why children who were taught in the local language had difficulties in



reading and writing (Akello & Timmerman, 2017) and secondly in 2013 during the evaluation of a study on using the child-centred pedagogy for teaching reading and writing (Akello, Timmerman & Namusisi, 2015). The lack of reading material was not a new challenge though it was the first time that the teachers went beyond just lamenting about it by taking steps to write the stories with the children within a participatory action research framework. This study therefore is intended to establish how teachers and pupils working within a participatory action research framework and develop reading materials and how the reading materials can be used to improve children's reading and writing in local language.

## **5.1 Background:**

### **5.1.1. Storytelling among the Acoli of Uganda**

Stories were told in the evening around the fireplace when every member of the family has returned home. At that time they would have already had dinner and would be at the fire place. The fireplace among the Acoli is significant in that it is the place where the parents or elders shared the experiences of the day, the children reported how they carried out the different tasks they were assigned for the day. It was a place where adults told stories that had moral lessons for all the members of the family but more especially for the children. It was a place where children learnt to tell stories since they listened to them several times. Listening to whoever was telling the story was the rule of the story telling sessions. Each time the children retold the stories they listened to, the adults could gauge the level of learning the child had reached. In a way this was a means of assessment. And for the stories that they have not mastered, the adult or another child that had mastered it would re-tell it to the children who were still learning. The

children were free to learn at the pace at which they wanted to learn. The idea of retelling the story by the adult and the children who had mastered the story to children who had not learnt the story, shows a lot of similarities to the principles of the Socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). According to the socio-cultural theory, the adult or the more competent peer offers support or guidance to the less competent peer during an interactive environment in a bid to help them learn. This support or guidance is offered until the moment the adult has gauged that the less competent children have learnt.

The fire place however, was to a great extent destroyed due to the 25 year long civil war that caused practically most of the people in Acoli sub-region to move into Internally Displaced People's Camps (IDPC) (Norris, 2014). The physical space and the insecurity in the IDPCs made it impractical to have the fire place in northern Uganda and this has greatly affected the culture of storytelling among the Acoli. In addition, due to advancement in technology, some adults and children living in and around trading centres converge to watch movies and football. Although the movies are detached from the experience of the children, some learning still takes place (O'Malley, 2010). This does not mean that the fireplace has vanished completely. Deep in the rural areas, families still sit in the evening in the compound or houses and tell children stories.

### **5.1.2. Children's reading and writing**

Literacy is an important educational goal all over the world. This is because the success of a society depends on the innovation of the next generation. Employees in the 21st century need to have greater literacy skills than in other time periods, as the average job requires literacy in the area of technology, as well as traditional forms of reading, writing, and communicating (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). According to Chatry-

Komarek (2003), literacy is the key to successful learning in school for any child. Later on, it is a basic element for active participation in social, economic, cultural, and political life.

Ogili and Nzeneri (2011) further argue that to achieve modernization, accelerated transformation of the economic and democratization of development institutions, meaningful and sustainable literacy activities are the keys. This is because, no democratic government can thrive in the midst of illiteracy, and no economy has space for illiteracy in the 21st century due to high technological changes as occasioned by globalization. Chatry-Komarek (2003) however, contends that although literacy alone does not guarantee personal success and national development, it is nevertheless a pre-condition for achieving both. For this reason, literacy has become a priority objective around the world. African government therefore have no alternative other than to join the global pursuit in creating schools in which children learn to read and write like all children. For both children and adults, the ability to read and write opens up new worlds and opportunities in life. Literacy enables children to gain new knowledge, enjoy literature, and to do everyday things that are part and parcel of modern life, such as, reading the newspapers, job listings, and instruction manuals, maps and so on with ease (Aina, Ogungbeni, Adigun & Ogundipe, 2011).

Currently teachers and stakeholders in education are pushing for the learning process that makes a child able to read right from the kindergarten level and yet this can only happen when children have books that they can read in school and at home. Carter (2003) emphasizes that the need for rich language experiences is critical to the cognitive and language development of young children, and while this must be encouraged in

homes, teachers also need to continue to provide these experiences for children when they start their formal education.

Chatry-Komerek (2003) on the contrary noted that most parents in Africa deal with daily matters on an oral basis, therefore many children arrive at school without any kind of print awareness. Moreover, there is complete lack of suitable reading books in their environment. At school, the luckiest of the children have one reading textbook per grade, and that is insufficient for them to become skilled readers (Heugh & Mathias, 2014; Chatry-Komerek, 2003). These children need more significant, enjoyable, exciting reading material. Village and city Libraries may provide them with some books in English but rarely with access to meaningful texts written in their own language and dealing with familiar realities of their daily experiences. Chatry-Komerek (2003) noted that the general lack of active support for the acquisition of literacy both at home and in school, is a challenge that many African teachers have to grapple with. Ideally, children learn reading by reading and writing by writing, although many African children have few opportunities to do so.

Many children learn to read and write both the local language and second languages at an early age. Some children and adults need additional help in reading and writing, while most people learn languages without difficulty (Aina, et al., 2011), yet others learn to read and write a second, third or additional language, with or without having learned to read in their first language. Research has shown that children who have had earlier meaningful experiences with print, including being read to often, seeing print in their daily lives, and experimenting with writing, are better prepared for literacy learning than those who lack such experiences (Carter, 2003). Carter argues that young

children's literacy concepts develop from experiences with print. He adds that children remember what is written in texts, and their experiments in writing and drawing support development in understanding about reading, writing and print. Hladíková (2014) pointed out that it is essential for children's books to have illustration since it contributes to children's further development and ability to perform well both in school and later in life.

Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) found that storybook reading expose children to vocabulary not used in everyday conversations and that children's familiarity with words and grammar permits them to discuss concepts better within decontextualized context. Carter (2003) emphasised that the teacher can, depending on the children's experiences, read the text, pausing before a word that can be determined by the picture and the text, to encourage children's participation and their reading with the teacher. The children should be encouraged to ask questions and make comments. Another important advantage of the book is that it permits a group of children to read a single book together.

In learning to read and write the teachers or peers need to take into account the different types of learners and their needs. Carter (2003) noted that if beginning reading instruction is to be effective, there must be a balance of activities designed to improve word recognition. These should include: opportunities to use the oral language, rapid recognition of the letters of the alphabet through association, the association of sound patterns in speech, and phonics teaching provided in a connected, formative manner, often engaging in the use of text.

According to the National Curriculum Development Centre [NCDC] (2008) having a rich learning environment is very important in stimulating children's mind to read and write. Instructional materials such as charts and flash cards contribute greatly in making a rich learning environment. Instructional materials are items that do not only support the teaching-learning process (NCDC, 2008) but also facilitate and make learners more active. While NCDC (2012) noted that instructional materials aid use of multi-sense and provide essential textual and visual input; NCDC (2008) emphasised that most of the materials for teaching local language can either be bought or made by the teacher. Teacher-made materials are specific and tend to answer the needs of the lesson more accurately (Carter, 2003).

NCDC (2012) encourages the teachers to use non textbook materials such as charts and flash cards which are language free for easy adaptation at lower primary (Primary one to three). From Primary four to seven teachers use textbooks to support the teaching of different subjects. In addition there should be stories, riddles, poetry local proverbs and song lyrics written by teachers and students, and which can be sung to familiar tunes (NCDC, 2012). Teachers are further advised to tailor their materials to the ability of the learner, the concepts and the competencies to be developed and the learning situation at hand. Together with their children, teachers can create 'book boxes' and reading corners, where children are able to read from charts and read to each other (NCDC, 2008).

Carter (2003) suggests that, wherever feasible, the creative work in writing and art should reflect all areas of the curriculum, and the use of local materials should be encouraged. According to Ghosn (2002) a curriculum that is based, or that draws

heavily on authentic children's stories, provides a motivating medium for language learning while fostering the development of the thinking skills that are needed for academic literacy. Carter insists that the materials should include a variety of narrative and expository books of varying levels of difficulty, and those which meet the interest of the individuals, and the selection of the stories be made by the children.

Chatry-Komarek (2003) pointed out that the most suitable teaching and learning aids is textbooks when it comes to reading and writing in African schools. He, however, argues that textbooks alone are not enough to solve the very challenging reading and writing puzzle in schools today. This is because even when there are textbooks in African languages, their distribution to schools are sometimes erratic (Charey-Komarek, 2003). For example, in studies elsewhere it was found out that approximately 10 pupils read from one reader and so because they were not able to read, most learners recited from memory (Heugh & Mathias, 2014; Oketcho 2014).

Carter (2003) note that most of the teaching materials could be got from the local environment and so urge teachers to participate in providing locally produced materials which are relevant, low/no cost and appropriate to the teaching-learning process. This justifies the need for additional reading materials in the child's own language. The goal of the study therefore is to involve teachers and children in developing materials that can be used not only in the classroom for teaching structures, new words and reading; but also as reading materials that children can take home and read.

### **5.1.3. Thematic curriculum and development of instructional materials**

The education sector, especially in primary school level, has undergone major transformations and innovations; for example, the review of the curriculum, the

introduction of the thematic curriculum and the training of primary school teachers in pedagogical skills (NCDC, 2006). The arrangement for the implementation of the thematic curriculum was that teachers were to use locally-made materials in the classroom and children should be provided with both text books and readers to help boost children's reading skills (NCDC, 2006). The situation in the schools, however, was different. Research showed that the teachers had the guide but the pupils' books were missing (Akello & Timmerman, 2017; Heugh & Mathias, 2014; Oketcho, 2014). And so in order to address the need for instructional materials during the learning process, the teachers wrote the stories on the chalkboard for the pupils to copy in their exercise books (Akello & Timmerman, 2017). The same study again noted that children could not practice reading because the text books were not available. This situation is not unique to the schools in Uganda alone, many classrooms in developing countries, especially in poor and rural areas possess one textbook, typically in the hands of the teacher. Consequently, the pupils spent most of their time copying the content from chalkboards to notebooks, and then memorizing it (UNESCO, 2008a).

#### **5.1.4. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory**

The study adopted Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in order to be able to understand better how children can learn by getting involved in the story telling, reading and writing processes. Vygotsky believed that learning occurs through socially mediated interactions in which an experienced peer or adult guides the child to explore a new concept slightly above the child's current level of development. Shared reading provides children with this opportunity when teacher or adult emphasizes skills that children have not yet developed, rather than focusing on



concepts that are already understood. This is best done in the context of relationships with an adult that is responsive and sensitive to the child's involvement in storytelling and story reading.

To facilitate interaction, the pupils with mixed abilities told and wrote stories in groups with their teachers. The mixing of pupils made it possible for the more competent peers to mentor the less competent peers. According to Nordlof (2014) learning through collaboration enables pupils to gradually attain a state of competence in which they could complete a similar task independently and pick on another task that is slightly difficult.

Adopting the ZPD for this study was appropriate since storytelling, story writing and drawing illustrations are social activities that the teachers and pupils collaboratively embark on in order to learn oral language and vocabulary (Thiel, Love & McDonald, 2011). This means that after narrating and writing the stories jointly, the younger children especially would likely be able to narrate and write the same story independently the next time (Vygotsky, 1978), and through that process, the learner's ZPD for storytelling and writing would have been raised. This process is repeated at the higher level of task difficulty that the learner's new ZPD requires. The collaborative aspects of Vygotsky's ZPD are in line with the principles of PAR.

## **5.2. Methodology**

The study was conducted within a participatory action research (PAR) framework. PAR is a highly collaborative process between expert researchers and the members of the organisation under study (Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy, 1993). PAR emphasises teamwork and active collaboration, where researchers and participants

work together to analyse a problem situation and generate actions to solve the problem (Chatterton et al., 2007). In adopting PAR framework for the study, the teachers and pupil had three levels of participation. The first level of participation was among teachers and teachers, secondly, among teachers and pupils, and lastly among pupils and pupils. The teachers collaborated in identifying the themes in the curriculum under which the stories told could fit. At the second level of participation, the teachers listened to the pupils' oral stories and either wrote it or corrected it with the pupils. In the third and last level of collaboration the pupils told and wrote the stories and drew the illustrations. These levels of collaboration involved moments of reflections, learning and decision making by the participants in order to accomplish the tasks successfully.

The collaborative nature of PAR was important in this study as it provided space for the teachers and children to work with each other in identifying and reflecting on the challenges of lack of reading materials and planning the story writing process. Involving children in identifying the problem and seeking possible solutions according to Mitra (2004) was appropriate since they are part of a school community and they have knowledge about the issues affecting the school. He adds that school reforms can be more successful if learners actively participate in shaping it.

### **5.2.1. The study**

The need to undertake this study on children's stories was prompted by the outcome of two earlier studies (Akello & Timmerman, 2017, Akello, et al., 2015). As part of the participatory action research process, the two studies were validated and evaluated during workshop sessions in order to establish the authenticity of the findings. The findings of the preliminary study were shared with the participants during

a feedback workshop. The practice of engaging in feedback workshop was adopted from earlier studies (Angucia, 2010; Tukundane, 2014) as the means of offering the participants the occasion of confirming authenticity of the findings or lack of it (Tukundane, 2014) and also for obtaining feedback from the participants (Burton & Bartlett, 2005; Akello, et al., 2015; Akello & Timmerman, 2017). In each workshop, the lack of reading materials featured as a challenge affecting children's learning to read and write. It was therefore imperative that ways to address the lack of reading materials had to be spelt out. A teacher proposed that children's stories could be written to address the challenge of lack of reading texts from grade one to four. The teachers in unison said, 'We can write the stories' (Akello & Timmerman, 2017). As the discussion went on it emerged that some of the teachers already had ideas of how to address the issue of lack of reading text for the children. At this point the participants went into four groups according to the classes they teach, while the other participants consisting of Head teachers, Deputy Head teachers, the tutors joined the different groups based on their preferences. The groupings provided moments for reflecting and discussing how practically they would go about the writing process. During a plenary session the participants, guided by their experiences in teaching literacy, made a number of suggestions that are in line with recommendations made in earlier studies.

### **5.2.2. Participants**

Twelve teachers and 720 pupils of lower primary classes from three primary schools were purposively selected. Involving children in the study provided a channel through which their voices can be heard (Alderson & Marrow, 2004) directly in matters that relate to the development of the reading text. Nine teachers taught reading and

writing in the local language from grades one to three while three teachers taught English in grade four. The teachers' background knowledge of the curriculum at the lower primary level and their willingness to improve their teaching practices and children's learning, made them principal participants in this study. The twelve teachers and the researcher collaborated with the pupils in telling, writing and rewriting the stories that were eventually printed into small booklet for the grades one to four pupils in three schools. The booklets were the main output of this study. Therefore through the collaborative input of the teachers, pupils and the researcher, it was possible to establish the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the story writing plan in promoting learning to read and write. In this paper, the teachers, pupils, researcher, Centre Coordinating tutor make the participants.

### **5.2.3. Children's story writing process**

The story writing process went through five stages: planning, storytelling, story writing, selection and vetting. In order to prepare for the story writing exercise, the participants during a workshop session came up with the following suggestions:

- i. Children in grade one and two are to tell the stories and the teachers are to write the stories down for them, while the children in grades three and four can write the stories and the teachers support them in improving the stories. The teachers' suggestions of making children in grade three and four write the stories tallies with Carter's (2003) proposal that older learners should be encouraged to write on their own and then share their stories with the class and Vygotsky's (1978) principles of mentorship in which the more competent peers offer support in a collaborative manner to the less competent peers.

- ii. Encourage children to tell and write stories in line with the themes in the curriculum so that later the stories can easily be incorporated in the teaching and learning sessions. This suggestion is in line with the proposal of Cater (2003) who noted that where possible creative work in writing and art should reflect all areas of the curriculum. According to Berardo (2006) students often find it very boring when dealing with only one subject area.
- iii. To work at class level with teachers from other schools to improve the stories especially during translation of stories from Acoli to English in grade four;
- iv. To make the children draw illustrations to help them have vivid pictures of the stories. The children who cannot read would see the illustrations and interpret them. This suggestion is in agreement with Carter's (2003) view that in writing stories, children should be made to draw illustrations to match the story as part of their contribution and the story should be placed in the classroom to enable children to try to read independently. In confirmation of Carter's views Berardo (2006) argues that variety in presentation also influences the choice of text and that presentation through the use of pictures, diagrams, photographs, helps to put the text into context. Appropriate presentation helps readers not only to understand the meaning of the text better but also to know how it would be used. A more 'attractive' text will appeal to the students and motivate them into reading.
- v. To ensure that the contexts of the stories are specific to the communities where the children come from, so that they can understand and identify with the stories

- vi. To mix up children with different abilities for purpose of promoting peer learning.

Storytelling in each of the classes was done during the last hour before lunch.

This was because towards lunch hours the pupils' level of concentration goes low and one of the activities that can help to keep them alert is storytelling. In this study, children took turns in telling the stories that lasted three to five minutes to their peers and the teacher. The stories were about animal characters such as the Leopard, Hare, Lion, Cock, Cattle, Dog; and fictitious characters like Ogre and 'Kiliti'. Involving children in the study helped them to identify and voice out the issues that were affecting their own learning to read and write and to contribute in solving the challenges from their perspective.

The story telling process depended on the grade the children were in. In grades one and two, children told stories two to three times in order to come up with a complete story. This is because they were not well versed with the stories and so they had to tell and retell it in order to come up with a complete story. Telling and retelling the story until children have learnt it, is a reflection of their growth within their zone of proximal development. Involving children in the story telling and writing was a means by which they realised their rights (Reddy & Ratna, 2002) to participate in solving problems that affected their learning to read and write. As the children told the stories, the teachers in primary one and two kept writing them down until they had at least four complete stories. In grades three and four, the children wrote out the stories because they had mastered them. The teacher playing the role of the 'adult and more knowledgeable peer' (Vygotsky, 1978) worked with the children to complete the

sentences and correct the spelling. The pupils however had challenges in selecting the stories to be presented at the feedback workshop for further scrutiny. Coincidentally, the stories were the same across the three schools involved in the study except that they were of different versions.

The process of selecting stories to be developed further for use in the classroom was carried out at two levels. First, each teacher and the pupils from the three schools made the selection of the stories at class levels and they agreed on four stories per class. The involvement of the children from the different schools in selecting the stories made it possible to have a variety of stories that were presented during the second phase of selecting the stories. This selection exercise is in line with Carter's (2003) proposal that materials should include a variety of narratives of varying levels of difficulty and the stories should meet the interest of the individuals and selection should be done by the children.

The second phase of selection was during a one day workshop in Gulu, in which the teachers from the different schools grouped themselves with the teachers of the same class from other school and shared their stories with each other. During the workshop, each group came up with four stories that were presented to the entire research team for evaluation. The evaluation was guided by criterion agreed upon by all the participants (see 5.2.4 below).

#### **5.2.4. Evaluation of the written stories**

At this stage of the story writing process the stories were subjected to a review by the Centre Coordinating Tutor and a member of the Acoli Language Board in order to ensure that they depicted the themes in the curriculum and could be used for teaching

reading and writing in the classroom. This was in line with Gravoso, et al. (2008) proposal that in order to ensure technical accuracy, reading materials needed to be reviewed by subject matter specialist prior to production for use. Nuttall (1996 cited in Berardo 2006) proposed three criteria for choosing texts that can be used in the classroom: suitability of content, exploitability and readability. Suitability of content can be the most important of the three, in that the reading material should motivate and interest the student as well as be relevant to their needs. Secondly, the text should be used to develop students' competences in reading. He adds that a text that cannot be exploited for teaching purposes has no use in the classroom. Thirdly, a text must be readable in terms of structure and lexical difficulty. Berardo (2006) proposed other factors worth taking into consideration when choosing materials for the classroom. It is important to check whether the reading text challenges the students' intelligence without making unreasonable linguistic demands; or whether the language in the text is natural or has been distorted in order to try and include examples of a particular teaching point. He also argues that it is important to establish whether the text lends itself to being studied, or questions can be asked about it or tasks based on it can be created. Above all he contends that it is necessary to check whether the text makes the students want to read for themselves or introduce new and relevant ideas to them.

To evaluate the stories the participants in addition to their background knowledge on children's stories, borrowed from Nuttall (1996) and Berardo (2006) and developed a check list to establish the suitability of the stories for learning purposes. The checklist focused on the following aspects of the stories:

- i. The appropriateness of the language used to the level of learners



- ii. The length/size of the story
- iii. Content of the story in relation to the level of the learner
- iv. The lesson(s) learnt or the moral implication
- v. The story's contribution to character formation of the children
- vi. Acceptable dialect
- vii. Use of descriptive language to build a vivid or lively picture/story/image in the mind of the child
- viii. The likelihood of using the story as a supplementary text
- ix. Are there flows of actions that can be illustrated in drawing?
- x. Do the illustrations tell the stories?
- xi. Does the story motivate the child to read and enjoy reading?
- xii. Under which theme does it fall in the lower primary school curriculum?

The Centre Coordinating Tutor (CCT) was involved in evaluating the stories because he monitors the teaching and implementation of the local language as a MoI and offers support supervision to teachers; while a member of the Acoli Language Board was involved because he plays the role of vetting children's stories in order to establish if it is written in the correct dialect; if it reflects the curriculum and if the appropriate illustrations were used. The guidelines that the participants generated for evaluating children's stories were in line with Nuttall (1996) proposal.

#### **5.2.5. Outcome of the evaluation process**

During evaluation of the stories the participants kept noting that a number of aspects needed to be adjusted or added in order to improve the quality of the stories. For example, in all stories illustrations were lacking. Secondly the stories from the different

schools were slightly different either in characters involved or in length. One particular story had a character that was hard to mentally visualize by the teachers and children, for example, ‘Kiliti’, in the story of grade four. Some thought it is an animal, others thought it was a giant or a human being or a bird. The difficulty in visualizing the character posed a challenge in drawing the illustration. The teachers and children, however through discussions and listening to the story figured out that ‘Kiliti’ could be a human being that is scaring, huge with a hairy body and one big eye. In some stories it was hard to track the flow of events, while in all of them, there was need to edit for spelling, paragraphing and to identify in which class the stories best fitted.

After the workshop, the participants had a number of activities to engage in order to improve the stories. The participants agreed to do the following:

- i. draw illustrations
- ii. check if the illustrations really were put in the right place in the story
- iii. edit the stories
- iv. use Century Gothic font since the print is similar to the hand written text to which the children have been introduced
- v. submit the stories to the local language board for vetting and approval for use in school
- vi. print the stories

The participants in groups accomplished the agreed tasks and submitted the written stories to the Acoli Language Board (ALD) for vetting and possible areas for improvement.

### **5.3. The contribution of the written stories to children's reading and writing**

#### **5.3.1. Children's experiences in using the written stories**

In order to establish how the written stories contributed to children's learning to read and write, after six months of using the written stories, the participants observed lessons, reviewed children's exercise books and conducted interviews with the teachers and pupils. Children were asked how the written stories had helped them to read and write. The responses varied from one class to another. The responses from the pupils in grade three were in connection with learning spelling and articulating words. A child in grade three shared how the book had helped her to read. 'Now I am able to see how the words are written and so I am learning the spelling. I can also hear the teacher and my group members read and I learn to read too'. Another child in grade three shared a similar experience:

Before the books were brought, I could say many of the words orally but did not know the spelling of some of them and if the teacher asked me to write them, I made a lot of spelling mistakes. But now I have the book and so I can see the way the words are spelt and I can pronounce and write the big words like 'promise' and 'burial'.

One of the pupils in grade three pointed out that he had another story book at home but some letters were written differently. The font that was used for the printed stories was Century Gothic. He expressed his relief:

I like this story because letter 'a' and 'g' are written is the same way as the one the teacher writes on the chart. Now it

makes it easy for me to read and even to write what I did not know before.

A child in grade three was happy with the level of competency she had gained in reading the story in the local language and expressed the desire of having a variety of stories.

I have learnt to read the story in Acoli easily and even when I get other writings in Acoli, I can read them well. I think I will one day read in church. Now I want to read new stories since I have known this one already.

The child's demand for new stories showed that learners can be more interested in reading if they have a variety of text in use (Berardo, 2006). Much as the children prided in being able to read, majority of those in grade three could read mostly two syllable word; they still had challenges with three and four syllable words.

Children were asked to mention a story that they liked most and state why they liked it most. The children had different reasons for liking one story or the other. For example, most of the children liked the story in the book of grade four, 'How Okeny became Rich'. One interesting scenario was of a child in grade two called Okeny. He shared his views:

I like the story about Okeny because the name is the same as mine. I like Okeny because he was obedient and hardworking. I like to be rich just as Okeny is. I have even learnt to write my name because I saw how it is written in that book. I want us to write another story with my name.

I like the story because Okeny listened to instruction and followed it well. And because he listened and followed instructions he received wealth. That means if we listen and follow instruction, then they will become rich with many cows.

From the responses of the children, it is clear that stories do not only help children to learn reading and writing; but they also act as a means of inculcating values in them. The children admired how the Okeny in the story became rich because of obedience and hard work. The children's changed attitude is in line with what Ghosn (2002) noted that literature can function as a change agent.

The children in grades one and two were attracted by the illustrations in the books. A child in grade two was excited about the illustrations. She said,

I like the story on how the 'Dove became friends with the Owl'. The pictures showing people who were dancing is nice. I saw another girl dancing like this (she imitated the dance) near the Dove. I like pictures very much.

Although the children in grades one and two indicated that they liked pictures, they expressed disappointment because the pictures were made in black and white. They preferred coloured pictures, especially those that are red and yellow.

Children's appreciation of the values in the different stories and demand for a variety of stories are already a pointer to what the participants should focus on in the next level of the study. In fact they are shaping and making a substantial contribution to the next research process.

### **5.3.2. Teachers' experiences in using the written stories**

In order to establish how the written stories contributed to children's learning to read and write, after six months of using the written stories, the researcher observed lessons, reviewed children's exercise book and conducted interviews with the teachers and pupils. During interview sessions the teachers were asked to share their experience on how they used the reading text in class and how it has contributed children's learning to read and write. A teacher reported:

In order to help the children gain fluency in reading each child was given a storybook to read aloud a number of times either as an individual or in pairs or small groups of three to five. This has helped the children to improve in the reading skills since they could see the words that they were reading and also hear how they were being read.

The teachers' approach to using the written stories are in line with Carter's (2003) suggestion 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 et al, 2003) and enable children to identify words, and to read on their own (Carter, 2003).

The teachers were also asked what effect illustrations had on children's learning to read and write. The teachers had different experiences with illustrations. One of them said,

They are very helpful to children, especially those in grade one and two who are not yet proficient in reading. They look at the illustrations and can be able to build up stories around it that are similar to the stories in the book.

Another teacher reported that:

Illustrations are very useful to children since it helped to boost up their mental ability to think and be creative and interpret illustrations. Eventually these categories of children learn to read by association since the illustrations present images that are within their experiences.

The children's experiences are in line with Hladikova's (2014) observation that pictures introduce and explain the world to children in a comprehensive way even before they are able to read. 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. According to Reading Is Fundamental (2010), picture books and their illustrations 'can hook children into a lifelong love of reading'. Hladikova (2014) stated that illustrations are essential for children's development and their ability to perform well both in school and later in life.

Picture books and illustrations broaden general knowledge and enable children to get a better understanding of themselves and their integration within society

(Reading In Fundamental, 2010). Picture books and illustrations often trigger children's imaginations, which aid children to think of new ideas and bring new possibilities into their lives, both immediately and up-coming (Hladikova, 2014). In fact teachers observed that children who were less active during the class time were more active during the storytelling time and during drawing illustrations; an indication that they had understood the stories and were able to translate them into drawings.

The children's improvement in reading and writing was confirmed during lesson observation and review of exercise books. During observation, we saw pupils participate in writing word that the teacher read aloud to them. Some of them were able to fill in the missing letters in a word or a missing word in a sentence. In reading other children read words that were written on the chalkboard. Some of the children too responded to questions asked on the story they had read in class.

As we reviewed their exercise books we noted that 75% of the children had improved in spelling words correctly and the pupils in grade three and four could write three syllable words correctly and with ease though 25% of them still had difficulties. The teachers however had identified the difficulties as in words that had a combination of /pw/ like in '*apwoyo*'. The pupils confused the /pw/ with /f/ in English and wrote it as '*afoyo*' and yet there is no /f/ in the Acoli sound system. The teachers had planned to give them more practice in differentiating /pw/ from /f/ during remedial classes.

#### **5.4. Challenges in using the written stories**

Through observation and interviews with the teachers on the challenges they faced during the story writing process, the teachers had varied responses. One of them was that sustaining children's interest during the writing process was hard. This was



because children tended to withdraw at three specific moments, namely when it came to writing words that they did not know the spelling of; secondly, in illustrating concepts that they were not able to mentally visualise and lastly in translating the stories written in Acoli to English. 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 and translating?

The children of grade four found it hard to illustrate specific aspects of their story. For example they had difficulties in visualizing the character 'Kiliti'. Even the teachers found it challenging. This posed a challenge in coming up with the illustration. The children and the teachers however, through discussions and consultation during a feedback workshop were able to come up with an agreed image that was drawn.

Children of grade one and two also found it hard to illustrate specific aspects of their stories and so they had to get help from children in grade four who had better understanding of the concepts of the stories and had developed their skills in making illustrations. Through their experiences they played the role of more competent peers in helping the children in grades one and two to improve their illustrations. It was hard to write the 'animal language' in the stories and so the beauty and humour that comes with it is somehow lost.

Another challenge is that as the story is being read, the humour, gestures, expressions, tone-variations- that were vivid in the oral versions do not come out clearly. The question then is, how does one maintain those features in the stories? Perhaps the stories could be accompanied by audio-visuals.

## **5.5. Conclusions**

Our findings 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 significant role in helping the beginners in reading and writing, since they could interpret the illustrations and try to explain what they entailed. Some children, however, still had difficulties in reading words with /pw/ sounds which they mistook for /f/ and yet /f/ does not exist in Acoli sound system. On the whole however, children developed interest in reading and writing and their proficiency in reading and writing improved.

The involvement of teachers and children in the story writing process within a participatory action research process was a worthwhile choice that has contributed 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.

## **5.6. Implications of the study for policy and practice**

The study above adopted a participatory action research framework that facilitated the teachers and children to identifying the challenges to reading and writing, suggesting a possible solution and writing the stories that the teachers have not been able to write for long even if the writing of stories was part of their duties. This therefore means that in order to help teachers and children solve challenges that relate to teaching

and learning, they need to be involved in all the stages of identifying the problem and proposing possible remedies and finally implementing a plan that would lead to solving the problem. Involving them will help them to appreciate the problem, take ownership and work towards finding a remedy.

Illustrations are very useful in helping children, especially those in grade one and some in grade two, who had not learnt how to read in order to be able to learn reading by association. In this study, children liked the illustrations that they drew. This means children should be involved in illustrating their stories or if they are not involved, then the illustrations need to be those that are appealing to children and they should have attractive colours.

The children's stories that the teachers wrote with the children were in line with some of the themes in the school curriculum. This made it possible for the teachers to use the stories as supplementary texts for teaching reading and writing the classroom. And since each child had a book, they were able to read the words that were taught in class and establish the various ways in which they are used. This was the same with sentence structures that they learnt in class. This means that stories and texts that are written for use in class should be in line with the themes in the school curriculum.

One aspect in printing written stories that is generally not taken care of is the type of font that is used. In most cases writers recommend fonts that contain letters that are written in a different way from the hand written text. Some letters like 'a' and 'g' are confusing to children who have not gained proficiency in reading and writing. It is advisable to begin by using fonts that the teacher uses in class, for example, Century Gothic, and they are familiar with and to introduce the other fonts later.

The humour, the songs and 'animal language' that are easily seen and demonstrated in oral presentations are lost in the written stories. The losses of these features affect the beauty and interest in the stories. These features can still be taken care of if the oral stories are recorded in a DVD and played to the children as they read the stories. Other means of preserving those features could also be investigated through another study.

# 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 (L<sub>1</sub>) 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.

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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.

## **Samenvatting**

In Sub-Sahara Afrika spreken de inwoners van een land verschillende talen. Uit deze talen wordt een taal gekozen als medium van instructie voor het onderwijs. Omdat, vooral in de lagere klassen van het basisonderwijs niet elk kind deze taal vloeiend spreekt, vormt dit een uitdaging. In een poging deze uitdaging het hoofd te bieden, hebben verschillende landen in de regio, inclusief Oeganda, een aantal hervormingen geïntroduceerd. In 1992 heeft Oeganda taalbeleid ontwikkeld en op basis daarvan in 2007 het thematisch curriculum ingevoerd. Andere hervormingen waren: de inrichting van taalcommissies, de promotie van taalschrijvers, de vorming van taalgroepen, de ontwikkeling van curricula, de training van leerkrachten en de ontwikkeling van spellingsregels en instructiemateriaal. Ondanks deze hervormingen laten resultaten van onderzoek in Oeganda en andere landen zien dat de geletterdheid in de lokale taal nog onvoldoende is. Daarom heeft dit onderzoek ten doel vast te stellen waarom kinderen die in de lokale taal worden onderwezen, moeilijkheden ondervinden bij het lezen en schrijven om op basis daarvan manieren te vinden waarop met deze uitdaging om kan worden gegaan.

De volgende onderzoeksvragen waren leidend voor de vier deelstudies:

- v. Waarom ondervinden kinderen die in de lokale taal worden onderwezen, moeilijkheden bij het lezen en schrijven in die lokale taal?
- vi. Hoe kan de kindgerichte pedagogiek bijdragen aan het leren lezen en schrijven van de kinderen in de lokale taal?
- vii. Hoe kan formatieve evaluatie ingevoerd worden in grote klassen als middel om kinderen te helpen om hun lees- en schrijfvaardigheden in de lokale taal te

verbeteren?

- viii. Welke rol kunnen door kinderen geschreven verhalen spelen om kinderen te helpen bij het leren lezen en schrijven in de lokale taal?

Het theoretische kader van dit onderzoek is gebaseerd op elementen van Vygotsky's sociaal-culturele theorie. Vygotsky pleit voor een kindgerichte benadering van onderwijzen en leren en benadrukt dat taal het voornaamste interactiemedium is. Hij wijst op de rol van sociale interactie tussen de leerkracht en de leerling als een middel om kennis over te dragen die nodig is om probleemoplossende activiteiten te leren construeren. Gedurende de interactie in de klas ondersteunt de leerkracht de leerling door een rijke en motiverende leeromgeving te scheppen waarin de leerling begeleid wordt in het construeren van kennis. De leerlingen spelen een actieve rol in het leerproces door ervaringen te delen en deel te nemen aan discussies in de groep en klas. Als sociaal constructivist raakt Vygotsky de kern van de kindgerichte benadering omdat hij zich richt op interactie, ondersteuning door de leerkracht en de rol van leerling in het eigen leerproces en dat van medeleerlingen.

De methodologie die voor dit onderzoek is gekozen, is *Participatory Action Research* (PAR). Deze methodologie kent verschillende fasen: voorafgaand aan de interventie, tijdens de interventie en na de interventie. In de fase voorafgaand aan de interventie zijn scholen geselecteerd, is het onderzoeksdoel besproken, zijn deelnemers gevraagd en heeft de eerste deelstudie plaats gevonden om vast te stellen waarom de kinderen die in de lokale taal werden onderwezen, moeilijkheden hadden met lezen en schrijven. De daarop volgende interventiefase bestond uit drie deelstudies die ieder voortkwamen uit aanbevelingen van eerdere studies. Elke deelstudie volgde de vijf fasen



van de PAR cyclus, namelijk: het bepalen en analyseren van de uitdaging, het plannen van de interventie, het uitvoeren van de interventie, het monitoren en evalueren ervan en het plannen van de volgende onderzoekscyclus.

De keuze voor PAR als methodologie zorgde ervoor dat de leerkrachten niet alleen onderzoek uitvoerden in hun eigen onderwijspraktijk om deze te begrijpen en verbeteren, maar ook gezamenlijk onderzoek met andere leerkrachten en andere deelnemers van binnen en buiten de school. Door middel van PAR hebben de leerkrachten hun ervaringen met het invoeren van de ontwikkelde interventies gedeeld in de vierdeelstudies met het doel om het lezen en schrijven van kinderen in de lokale taal te bevorderen. Deze deelstudies zijn onderling nauw verbonden en weerspiegelen het cyclisch karakter van PAR.

De deelstudie, die voorafging aan de interventie, legde een aantal factoren bloot, die het effectief gebruiken van de lokale taal als instructietaal beïnvloedden. De uitdagingen varieerden van het ontbreken van een vertaald curriculum (van Engels in de lokale taal) tot de uiteenlopende taalvoorkeuren van de belanghebbenden en het gebrek aan instructiematerialen. In het bijzonder werden verhalen voor kinderen om het leren lezen en schrijven in hun eigen taal te bevorderen gemist. Andere uitdagingen waren de zwakke taalbeheersing van de leerkrachten, het gebruik van leerkrachtgerichte methodologie, niet-passende toetspraktijken, gebrek aan administratieve ondersteuning, hoge leerkracht-leerling ratio, niet-passende toelatingscriteria, onvoldoende ondersteuning door de ouders van het leren van hun kinderen en onvoldoende training van de leerkrachten om het curriculum te implementeren. In feedbackbijeenkomsten waarin de onderzoeksresultaten besproken werden, wezen de

deelnemers op de beperkingen van de leerkrachtgerichte methodologie voor de succesvolle implementatie van het lokale taalbeleid. Ze pleitten ervoor om als interventie de kindgerichte pedagogie in te voeren.

De ervaringen met de implementatie van de kindgerichte pedagogie als eerste interventie wezen uit dat het leerproces van de kinderen ondersteund werd en hun lees- en schrijfvaardigheid verbeterde door het betrekken van de kinderen bij het leerproces op individueel en groepsniveau, het invoeren van formatieve toetsing en het gebruik van passende instructiematerialen. Wel werd opgemerkt dat sommige leerlingen nog steeds moeilijkheden ondervonden bij het lezen van woorden met drie lettergrepen, het vormen van eenvoudige zinnen en het hanteren van interpunctie. Om de lees- en schrijfvaardigheid van de kinderen in de lokale taal te verbeteren, werden de leerkrachten aangemoedigd om meer instructiematerialen te gebruiken, formatieve toetsing in kleine groepen in te zetten en werkvormen te ontwerpen die de interactie en participatie van de kinderen bevorderen. Verder bleek dat de leerkrachten ondersteuning, supervisie en training nodig hadden om de kindgerichte pedagogie succesvol te kunnen implementeren.

Gebaseerd op de aanbeveling van de studie van de eerste interventie is de tweede interventiestudie gericht op toetsing in grote klassen. De onderzoeksresultaten gaven weer dat de leerkrachten de voorkeur gaven aan toetsing aan het einde van een thema en aan het einde van een onderwijsperiode en dat dagelijkse beoordelingen nauwelijks voorkwamen. Het was lastig om elke dag te beoordelen omdat er tussen de 100 en 120 leerlingen per klas waren en omdat de leerkrachten ook andere taken hadden naast het nakijken en feedback geven aan de leerlingen over hun lees- en schrijfvaardigheden..

De studie gaf ook aan dat de betrokkenheid van de leerkrachten in PAR een positieve verandering teweegbracht ten opzichte van het beoordelen van de competenties van de kinderen in lezen en schrijven. Door hun deelname aan PAR werden de leerkrachten in staat gesteld om ervaringen te delen, te reflecteren op hun praktijken van toetsen en beoordelen en gezamenlijk met de andere leerkrachten in het onderzoeksteam manieren te ontwikkelen om om te gaan met de toetsing van de lees- en schrijfvaardigheden van de kinderen. Aanbevelingen die voortkwamen uit de studie waren dat leerkrachten om de toetsing effectiever te maken meer dienen te reflecteren op hun onderwijspraktijk en het leerproces van de kinderen, en samen dienen te werken met collega's om de dagelijkse beoordeling en directe feedback vorm te kunnen geven.

Bevindingen van de derde interventiestudie laten zien dat de lees- en schrijfvaardigheden van de kinderen verbeterden door het werken met de geschreven verhalen, omdat ze de vorm van de letters, de spelling en uitspraak van de woorden leerden. Door de verhalen werden ook morele waarden overgedragen aan de kinderen. Hoewel de illustraties bij de verhalen de kinderen hielpen om ze te begrijpen, werd wel duidelijk dat de kinderen in klas 1 en 2 moeite hadden met het lezen van de woorden met drie lettergrepen. Bovendien misten de geschreven verhalen de 'dierentaal', de humor, gebaren en stemvariaties die de gesproken verhalen begeleidden. Dat had invloed op de schoonheid en de betekenis van de verhalen voor de kinderen. Het gebruik van geschreven kinderverhalen om het lezen en schrijven te bevorderen dient daarom gepaard te gaan met audiovisuele middelen om de humor, stemvariaties en 'dierentaal' te behouden.

Gebaseerd op de onderzoeksresultaten zijn de voornaamste aanbevelingen:

- Om te reflecteren op de uitdagingen van de onderwijspraktijk en de leerprocessen van de kinderen en te werken aan verbeteringen, zouden leerkrachten samen moeten werken in het kader van PAR. Dit geeft hen de ruimte voor discussie, onderzoek, reflectie en gezamenlijke besluitvorming om praktische oplossingen voor de uitdagingen van de onderwijspraktijk te ontwerpen. Daarnaast biedt PAR de leerkrachten de mogelijkheid om van *best practices* te leren door het uitwisselen van ervaringen.
- Om de kindgerichte pedagogie effectief te implementeren, is het nodig om de leerkrachten die daarin actief zijn, te trainen in het ontwerpen en gebruiken van passende instructiematerialen, om dagelijks te beoordelen en de voortgang bij te houden, om directe feedback te geven aan de kinderen en *remedial teaching* in te zetten voor achterblijvende vaardigheden. Voor de implementatie van kindgerichte pedagogie is het nodig dat de leerkrachten de te onderwijzen lesinhoud beheersen. Tevens is het nodig om het aantal kinderen per klas terug te brengen om de werkbelasting van de leerkrachten te verkleinen.
- Effectieve leerprocessen van kinderen vinden plaats door interactie tussen volwassenen en kind en tussen kinderen en hun medeleerlingen. De leerkrachten moeten daarom weloverwogen activiteiten plannen en een leeromgeving creëren die niet alleen interactie tussen leerkracht en leerlingen en tussen leerlingen onderling bevordert, maar ook mogelijkheden biedt voor incidenteel leren.
- Om het succesvol implementeren van kindgerichte pedagogie door leerkrachten mogelijk te maken is het noodzakelijk dat het management van de school en de betrokken (overheids-)instanties regelmatig trainingen organiseren om te

voorzien in het gesignaleerde gebrek aan vaardigheden van de leerkrachten. Om de onderwijsvaardigheden te versterken is er bovendien behoefte aan ondersteuning en supervisie. Training in het implementeren van kindgerichte pedagogie moet onderdeel zijn van de opleiding van de leerkrachten vanaf de start. Zonder deze ondersteunende maatregelen zullen de leerkrachten terugvallen op de leerkrachtgerichte benadering van onderwijs die kinderen de kans om deel te nemen in kenniscreatie ontnemt.

- Dagelijks beoordelen en directe feedback is haalbaar in klassen van 50-60 leerlingen, als de werkbelasting van de leerkracht is gereduceerd. Binnen PAR is het echter mogelijk om kinderen dagelijks te beoordelen op groepsniveau in klassen variërend van 80 tot 120 leerlingen. Leerkrachten moeten daartoe met hun collega's binnen PAR werken aan praktische mogelijkheden om grote klassen te toetsen.
- Het gebruik van verhalen die door de kinderen zelf geschreven zijn, versterkt het leren lezen en schrijven in de lokale taal, omdat de kinderen hierdoor leren hoe letters worden geschreven en hoe woorden worden gevormd en gelezen. De leerkrachten moeten in PAR met de kinderen aan de slag om hen verhalen te laten schrijven.

**Appendix 1: The major language groups and the major language families in Uganda (Lewis, 2009)**



## About the author

Lucy Dora Akello was born on October 19, 1963 in Gulu, Uganda. She went to primary schools in Lira, Gulu, Kampala and Jinja and to secondary schools in Gulu and Lira in Uganda. Thereafter she trained as a secondary school teacher and obtained a Bachelor of Education at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya. She later went for a Master of Education in Makerere University, Uganda. She is currently a lecturer at Uganda Martyrs University and is teaching General Teaching Methods and English Language and Literature.

In 2012 she was awarded a Netherlands Fellowship Programme (NFP) scholarship to conduct a PhD study on sandwich mode in the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. On the basis of this thesis, she will be awarded a doctorate in Pedagogy and Educational Sciences by the University of Groningen on Monday 4 June 2018 at 11:00 hours. Lucy Dora Akello's research interests are in the field of child-centred pedagogy, literacy and language development



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