Using Local Languages Alongside English: Shaping Student Success
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Introduction

In multilingual learning contexts such as those prevalent in the African continent and many other parts of the world, learners fear that they cannot understand content when English is used as the medium of instruction. Their fears and their educational needs are a reminder to TESOL teachers in primary and secondary schools as well as in tertiary institutions that they should exploit the readily available value of the local language in order to help learners think about and respond effectively to the curriculum. English is sometimes perceived as a threat to minority languages or to language diversity (Majidi, 2013), a view often associated with the dominance of English in the public domain, including the classroom. The fear in the classroom is likely to persist if TESOL professionals neglect the resource in local languages as learning support.

In my World Summit presentation, I argued that TESOL professionals can be shapers of their students' success if they advocate for policies and develop classroom practices that exploit the local language or languages as a tool that helps learners think about and respond effectively to the curriculum, even when the latter is delivered in the medium of English. In this paper I show this by describing the experience of 13 M.Ed. Language and Literature Education students whose attitude towards a writing assignment shifted from one of passive involvement to that of active engagement when the local language medium was used in feedback and guidance on the assignment. I discuss some of the challenges the students faced when writing in English and offer some ideas for how to provide additional support in a familiar language. The introduction of local languages was felt to be a means to helping learners understand tasks and feel more secure about their performance, even where English remains the medium of instruction.

The Students' Writing Assignment

The M.Ed. Language and Literature Education class consisted of 13 secondary school language teachers, all Ugandan but from seven language groups and specializing in the teaching of different languages as subjects: English, Luganda, or Kiswahili. English was the stipulated medium of instruction on all the core M.Ed. courses and was maintained on all the elective courses taken by the eight students who specialised in teaching English.   The two students who specialised in teaching Luganda were taught their elective courses in the Luganda medium and the three who specialised in teaching Kiswahili followed their elective courses in the Kiswahili medium. The use of the local languages for elective courses had resulted from Luganda and Kiswahili Language specialists' complaints about being

taught in English for their core courses. They had joined the programme with the expectation that they would be taught in the languages they specialized in, and that the programme would equip them with content to teach in their own language classes. Moreover, the students' expectations were reiterated by their lecturers who, looking beyond the learning challenge to the current debate on including local languages in Uganda's secondary school curriculum, used the M.Ed. programme to popularize these languages. Drawing attention to the mismatch between their interests and the stipulation for English as medium of instruction, the students' expectations pointed to the issue of how best they should be supported to participate gainfully in the M.Ed. programme. Deliberately using the local language whenever it was practically possible thus became one of my commitments in delivering courses, and I was able not only to practise but also to evaluate my approach in the context of an assignment for a core course entitled *Theory and Practice of Language and Literature Pedagogy*. The assignment was intended to test partly the students' understanding of the multilingual context where they work and partly their evaluation of language teaching methods. It was to be written in English. It required the students to identify, with justification and illustrating with any language, the two most effective teaching methods for a language teacher to use with Senior 1 students. In Uganda, Senior 1 is the first year of secondary school, which students join at an average age of 13. Apart from English, which Senior 1 students would have been learning as a subject in primary school, they encounter foreign languages such as French, German and Chinese and local languages such as Luganda and Kiswahili. Depending on the choices of an individual school a student may, on average, have to learn English, one foreign language and two local languages. Besides having to learn English as a subject, all students have to learn all the school subjects – on average 15 – in the English medium. The M.Ed. students' writing illustrated some difficulties, which they linked to the use of English when they responded to my feedback on the assignment. These are described below.

Challenges with English Only

The entire class identified the Direct Method and Communicative Language Teaching Methods as the most practical for teaching Senior 1. The strikingly identical scripts of 11 of the 13 students became a source of curiosity because all these students wrote exactly the same statements, in the same order, expressed the same way word for word, and presented with exactly the same errors. The similarities suggested that the class had held a discussion before writing, which was encouraging evidence of collaboration.   But the suggestion that beyond the discussion individuals did not write independently raised concern for specific guidance. The scripts presented facts about the methods – what they involve, their theoretical bases and aims and their advantages and disadvantages. There were no arguments on practicality or effectiveness and, curiously, no reference to Senior 1 learners and their learning context. It was not surprising to learn later, from the students' explanations, that their scripts were downloads from a single source. Having copied chunks from a publication available in the resource centre, the individual they had entrusted with the role of 'researcher' shared his 'notes' on the methods and the group adopted these as their own, reproducing them for their coursework scripts. The reproduction not only of the author's ideas but also of each other's text guided my inquiry into the difficulties that the students had encountered in writing the assignment.

Students were anxious to discuss the difficulty of writing in English, explaining that they had not understood what was required of them, for various reasons. The English Language specialists were

concerned about the wording of the task, which made it different from those they were used to. According to their response to the feedback, they would have been better off with prompts like "What are the advantages and disadvantages of …?" or What were the causes and consequences of …?" In their view, such prompts ask for written tasks that "*are straight forward and you only need to come to the paper and write out what you have read and what the teacher has said*". To them, the term "practical" was confusing since "*every method is practical because it is what you do, rather than the theory*". Kiswahili and Luganda specialists worried about the use of English per se. They explained that they hadn't understood the prompt or task because it had been given in English. For instance, one said:

> *For us we were biased. We thought for us we are doing Kiswahili not English. This one is not for us. We don't understand it. So we waited for the English people to read and discuss for us. Then we could write what they discussed.*

Another expressed concern about the vocabulary in the group discussion, saying "*Also when they discussed the terms were very difficult …. They used technical terms*". This position is similar to that taken by the Luganda specialists who waited for their colleagues to read and "*lead the discussion*" before they adopted their answers for submission. They too feared that they did not understand what they were required to do since the assignment was to be written in English:

> *We don't understand much in the English books. But there are no Luganda books for us to read from. Also we don't study these methods in Luganda. …. We do grammar, some plays and novels, and translations.*

These were signs that even at post-graduate level, and in spite of having learnt primary and secondary school curricula in the English medium, students can struggle to understand English and may be threatened by tasks set in this medium. I therefore looked to local language as a remedy.

Use of Local Language as Support

Once we discussed the requirements of the task in Luganda, which all the students understood well enough for the purpose of feedback, the students expressed their specific needs freely. Although they often taught Senior 1 students, the class wanted to know, for instance, how to describe this group of learners since the description was key to justifying their choice of methods. They wanted to know how to argue that a specific method was more suitable than another, based on the characteristics of a specified group of learners. They also wanted to know the meaning of several technical terms encountered in their discussion.

The most outstanding outcome of the feedback was the choice by seven of the students to redo the assignment, once again in English. I take this to be a sign that they could benefit significantly from the use of local language alongside English, as illustrated by their understanding of the requirements of a task after having been able to discuss the issues in a local language that they all understood. This particular case illustrates how teachers can help make English more acceptable as a medium of instruction by allowing learners to use a familiar language alongside English so that they can draw upon the wealth of their existing knowledge and experience. In this way they would be attending to the psychological factors that learners bring to the learning experience, as Ainley et al. (2002) argue we should. The benefit is also underscored by Moje et al. (2000)'s reminder of the critical value of the spaces and associations that learners bring with them to learning.

Conclusion: Shaping Multilingual Student Success

The use of local languages may seem an awkward choice to some teachers who view the stipulation for English as medium very seriously, especially those who are new in the profession. This makes it necessary for the more experienced teachers to coach their younger counterparts to be sensitive to students' response to the use of English and to modify not only their language but also their approach. Such sensitivity relates to Moje's (1996, 2008) arguments for putting empathy with students' understanding and application above teachers' own care for subject content. Empathy in this context is less about use of simpler vocabulary and expression and more about the use of comprehensible oral input in the local language. It is about providing instructions that enable task completion and feedback that aids improvement.

I feel that the greatest value of making space for multiple languages in the English-medium classroom lies in the use of a language that students understand and thus in the reassurance that they can actually use this language as a resource in the process of completing a task in English. Making space for the local languages can make students shift from fear of the task to evident interest in it. This is an important reminder of the universally known fact that a learner's interest in and motivation for something depends on the quality of their experience with it. Indeed, teachers should aim to make learners' experience of English as a medium of instruction an interesting one so that the students are motivated to view the language as a vehicle to ideas and for sharing information rather than as a burden or even a barrier to learning. Neglect of the value of local language as a resource in the classroom is bound to result in the persistent fear of learners in multilingual contexts that they will not learn if English is used as the medium of instruction, only emphasising the perceived threat of English to minority languages.

References

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