

Rethinking languages of instruction in African schools

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Introduction

In most African countries, languages of instruction come from overseas. The variety and the use of those languages depend very much on the colonialist legacy. Languages of instruction in African schools include English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Afrikaans. In some countries also, African languages are used as the language of instruction but only at the elementary school level. What does it mean to learn in foreign languages and in a foreign context? To what extent do languages of instruction contribute to the qualitative transformation of personal and social processes?

The idea about the use of indigenous languages in Africa is not new. By the end of the 1960s and through the 1970s, the debate attained its highest point. The major obstacle was that most of the countries in Africa have many languages, except a few such as Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia, where all people speak one language throughout the country. It would be very ambitious, even superfluous to reduce the complexity of African languages to one single language used in one single nation. Maybe, the debate should be contextualised and arguments supported according to the needs of the population concerned. Feasibility is another issue which needs to be addressed (for further development). In this paper, the Rwandan context is an illustrative case. However, this paper is not a result of an empirical study. It is rather a reflection based on the literature, and on my own experience as a teacher.

Language policy in Rwanda

Rwanda is small country of 26,338 square kilometres and 8 million people. It is located in Central/Eastern Africa. The native language is Kinyarwanda, which is spoken all over the country by all people. In addition to Kinyarwanda, English and French are recognised by the constitution as the official languages. According to the education policy, Kinyarwanda must be a language of instruction in the lower primary school; this is the first three years of elementary level. From the first year of the upper primary school, pupils are expected to choose either English or French as a language of

instruction. From then on, Kinyarwanda and one of the two foreign languages become subjects to be taught. However, in some prestigious private schools, one of the foreign languages is definitely a language of instruction from even the pre-school up to the university and Kinyarwanda is not taught at all.

From the secondary school level, students are supposed to be (theoretically) perfectly bilingual in English and French, but the reality on the ground is different; firstly, because teachers do not have the same characteristics of being bilingual. Teachers cannot give to students the characteristics that they do not have. Secondly, the school environment is not conducive for practising foreign languages. Outside the classroom, at home, at the church, on the street, in administration and business, briefly, in students' everyday life, Kinyarwanda is almost exclusively the only language of oral communication. Thirdly and most importantly, if Kinyarwanda is spoken by the majority of Rwandan people, not more than 10% of the population can read and speak fluently English or French. What happens to those 90% of the population who can only speak Kinyarwanda? It is important to stress here that, according to the UNESCO figures, only around 50% of Rwandan people can read and write.

Language of instruction in the construal of a person

When I ask my students to discuss an article in small groups, they do it in Kinyarwanda, even though the article is written in English or French. One day, I asked some of them to answer some questions in line with a short lecture I gave them in English. They tried and I realised that they were struggling with English and not with the content per se. They explained that they did not understand English because they were basically French speaking though they were supposed to be bilingual according to the national policy. Another day, I gave a short lecture in French to the same students. Then they became more dynamic than they were before. The last time, I used Kinyarwanda, their mother tongue, to explain the lecture rather than English or French. The students became not only dynamic but also excited to talk and discuss critically issues under study.

This experience brought me to reflect on the purpose of languages of instruction. English and French are of course important in order to be able to open students' horizons, and to exchange views with the world. However, it seems that Kinyarwanda should not be left behind if the purpose of education is to bring students to understand, see the reality in different ways, and shift their mindsets in order to cope with change within and around them. Most of the scientific books we come across in African schools have

been written by Europeans and Americans in their particular contexts and in their specific languages. The meanings assigned to this literature through examples, stories, analogies, metaphors, application, theorization, and even the style of writing are primarily embedded in their social realities.

Marton et al (2004) point to an issue which deserves more attention in the African context, especially in Rwanda:

“A space of learning that is semantically rich allows students to come to grips with the critical features of the object of learning much more effectively than one that is semantically impoverished” (p.32).

How much more beneficial would it be for students to learn in the language they understand better? How effective would the outcomes of learning be when they work in a rich semantically learning space?

The social situation or the culture within which the child is educated is the foundation of meaning. Moreover, Halliday explains that: “The context plays a part in determining what we say; and what we say plays a part in determining the context” (Halliday quoted in Wells, 1999, p. 8). Language is therefore a cultural means that has been developed and refined to serve the purpose of social action and interaction. When we learn the language, we appropriate also the social context within which the meaning is created. By learning French or English, for example, we also acquire the French or English cultures. We try to integrate their social contexts so that we can understand what is said and why. This discussion explains partly how the competence of African graduates becomes sometimes “inefficient competence” due to semantically impoverished classroom situations they experience when they come back to their countries of origin.

Conclusions

The mastering of language and the mastering of human behaviour are mutually linked. The difference in ability to master tools (such as language) and use them effectively can portray, to some extent, the difference in qualitative developmental changes. Languages of instruction, if not well used, can discriminate among potential students and even create social classes among the population: those who can learn with foreign languages and those who cannot; those who have good teachers of foreign languages and those who do not. Foreign languages of instruction contribute to excluding students who fail to master them from the educational system. Those students who cannot or who fail to master foreign languages also have the right to learn, especially in their native languages.

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