

Revisiting English as medium of instruction in rural African classrooms

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In this paper, we address findings from a study conducted in a rural, Ugandan secondary school from August 2009 to May 2011 that explored the challenges and possibilities of developing language and literacy across the curriculum, including digital possibilities for the development of multilingual academic literacy. The central questions we address are: (1) in a rural African context, what educational conditions and language policies impact the use of English as a medium of instruction in secondary schools? and (2) how do teachers across the curriculum navigate these conditions and policies to integrate English language and content? Data collection methods included questionnaires, interviews, observations, policy document analysis and researchers' journal reflections. Central findings highlight the difficulties faced by content teachers in addressing their students' language needs in the context of contemporary policy guidelines; issues related to the pre-service preparation of subject area teachers; and possibilities for developing pedagogy for teaching language/s and literacies across the curriculum. From the findings, we argue that language policies, despite best intentions, might, like other 'placed resources' become dysfunctional when moved across distinctly different spaces from relatively well-resourced urban areas to poorly resourced rural communities and from elite to grassroots contexts.

Keywords: English as medium of instruction; language policy; placed resources; multilingualism; rural Africa; language across the curriculum

As Minister of Education and Sports, I am, of course, concerned that all subjects on the school curriculum should be taught well, but language education has a particular importance because it is fundamental to the teaching of any other subject. Education involves, above all, the communication and development of ideas, and this can hardly be done without language. ... Students who do not have adequate command of the language of instruction [English in Uganda's case] cannot hope to do well in any subject.

– Hon. Apolo Nsibambi (2000), Minister of Education and Sports; Prime Minister of Uganda

Our journey begins on 3 August 2009 on Canada's west coast with a 10-hour flight to London. Nine hours after perusing Heathrow's high-end boutiques, we are en route via Entebbe to the remote village of Sebatya in eastern Uganda. After three hours by truck, north-east of the congested city of Kampala, the road turns to red dirt. We drive on for an hour to the thriving town of Mbale. Early next morning, we continue south-east on the dusty road. Young people, two or three to a bike, ride alongside in the rich green countryside. Men with bags of grain piled high over both wheels, and a child on the crossbar, make their cycle

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rides to and fro with supplies. Women, some with a child on their lap, sit on makeshift seats behind the cyclist or walk to a well with huge yellow containers on their heads. It is hot and humid. At the far eastern edge of these rural communities, we eventually arrive at the village of Sebatya, and our destination, the Sebatya Secondary School (SSS), declared proudly by a sign painted in several colours and of varying graphic skills on its facade.

Our visit comes by invitation of the principal to help promote more effective learning and teaching in the school. The invitation was prompted by the principal's awareness of the wide-ranging programme of research on language and literacy that the larger University of British Columbia team has undertaken in Uganda.¹ As language and literacy researchers and critical language teacher educators (Hawkins and Norton 2009), we strive to be increasingly mindful of the nature of the language policy, programmes and practices in which our work is situated. In this spirit, the purpose of this paper is to focus on secondary teachers' perspectives and practices with regard to the use of English as a medium of instruction (MoI) across the curriculum. Our two research questions are as follows: first, in a rural African context, what educational conditions and language policies impact the use of English as MoI in secondary schools? and second, how do teachers across the curriculum navigate these conditions and policies to integrate English language and content? We are thus concerned with both the macro- and micro-contexts of learning. Our research was conducted in the spirit of capacity-building advocated by the indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and the literacy scholar Brian Street (2003).

Having provided some general context, we consider in the next section what other research has been conducted on English as MoI in Africa, and how teachers in diverse parts of the world have navigated language and content instruction in their classrooms. We then turn to the description of our research site, the teacher participants, and the data collection and analytic procedures. We follow this with a discussion of our findings and analysis with respect to our two research questions: (1) the educational conditions under which teachers work and the language policies that inform their practice; and (2) the ways in which teachers navigate these conditions and policies to integrate English language and content. The latter discussion is grounded in each of the three separate 'small stories' of classrooms we became acquainted with (biology, art and design, and English), each providing learnable lessons that, while unique to that class, reflect broader issues and themes that emerged across the research. The discussion section highlights key themes at both the macro- and micro-levels. We conclude by cautiously suggesting some recommendations for ways forward.²

Literature review

In framing our study and research questions, we recursively drew on two interrelated bodies of literature: (1) English-medium education in Africa, with a focus on language education policy as a 'placed resource'; and (2) teaching language and content in second language contexts.

English-medium education in Africa

There is a considerable body of research literature in African classrooms where instruction across the curriculum is carried out in English (MoI). Our review revealed, as Rea-Dickins, Yu, and Afitska (2009, 190) also noted, that 'the medium of English ... as a mediating tool for subject learning has become increasingly controversial in recent years'. Like Clegg and Afitska (2011), we found a recurring theme in the strong relationship between the use of

European languages (MoI) and poor performance in school, as learners do not possess the advanced language and literacy requisite to use these second/foreign languages as the medium for their education (Williams and Cooke 2002; Dutcher 2004; Probyn 2006; Alidou and Brock-Utne 2006). It has also been reported that similarly teachers do not possess the advanced language proficiency in English required to make their subject matter clear (e.g. Cleghorn and Rollnick 2002; Probyn 2006). National monolingual policies notwithstanding, codeswitching is commonly reported as a coping teacher strategy employed for multiple purposes, including instruction, classroom management and affect (Probyn 2006; Cleghorn and Rollnick 2002; for a review of learning in two languages, including codeswitching, see Clegg and Afitska 2011). Additionally, Cleghorn and Rollnick noted a washback effect of an examination-driven system on teachers' practices which tend to become restricted to narrow exam preparation activities. More comprehensively, Rea-Dickins, Yu, and Afitska (2009) review the literature on issues of 'test fairness and social consequences' (192) when learners are assessed in non-mother tongue languages and report inequities. Still, a theme repeated in the literature (Tembe 2006; Tembe and Norton 2008) is that for community members, and significantly for parents as well as policymakers, being educated means proficiency in English, as it is perceived as a prerequisite for upward mobility and global citizenship.

As a way forward, scholars, for example, Probyn (2001), Cleghorn and Rollnick (2002), and in the Ugandan context, Kyeyune (2011), argue for teacher reflection, dialogic engagement and that 'we should train teachers in action research skills to empower them to work as curriculum leaders who not only understand the varied needs of their learners but also respond to them creatively and satisfactorily' (86). We concur and believe, like Ramanathan and Morgan (2007), that there is a need for greater attention to the implications of locality in policy research and enhanced practitioner agency in the process. Moreover, from our review of content-based instruction in industrialised countries and the MoI in Africa, we wholeheartedly concur with Benson's (2009) position, based on her comparison of common bilingual 'northern models' in the context of 'southern realities', that they have 'different connotations and consequences in the South than in the North due to contextual differences and extreme socioeconomic gaps between dominant and non-dominant groups' (70).

In this regard, there has been increasing interest in the construct of 'placed resources' with respect to the ways in which language and literacy practices 'travel' from one context to another. Jan Blommaert (2003, 2010), who is interested in issues of place with respect to what he calls a 'sociolinguistics of globalization', argues that there needs to be a paradigmatic shift from the study of language as 'static, totalized and immobile' to one that is 'dynamic, fragmented and mobile' (2010, 197). The genesis of these ideas, which are more fully developed in his 2010 monograph, is found in Blommaert (2003), in which he argues that a sociolinguistics of globalisation is in fact a sociolinguistics of mobility. As he notes:

[W]henever sociolinguistic items travel across the globe, they travel across structurally different spaces and will consequently be picked up differently in different places. (612)

These different places, Blommaert argues, are structured by inequality, and the impact of social and cultural forms of capital across these spaces, whether geographical or social, varies greatly. Further, whenever discourses travel globally, he argues, what is of great interest is not their shape, so to speak, but their value, meaning and function. These are

‘a matter of uptake, they have to be *granted* by others, on the basis of dominant indexical frames and hierarchies’ (616, italics in original).

There has been much interest in Blommaert’s notion of ‘placed resources’ in the African context. Prinsloo (2005), for example, draws on Blommaert to argue that ‘the new literacies of screen-based and Internet communication work in particular ways in low technology and socially distinctive African contexts [and] are best studied as placed resources, with local effect’ (88). In a similar spirit, Norton and Williams (2012) examine the ways in which the digital portable library, eGranary, might be considered a placed resource with very particular local effects. In this paper, we extend the concept of ‘placed resources’ to include policy documents, programme designs and pedagogical practices that may not travel well across the globe, from the north to the south nor within the south from the urban to the rural.

Teaching language and content in L2 elementary and secondary classrooms

Over the past three decades, there has been an extensive literature on policy, programmes and practices in classrooms, almost exclusively in regions that are global economic centres, where ELL students are learning school subjects in English (e.g. Crandall 1992; Snow 1998; Mohan, Leung, and Davison 2001; Stoller 2004, 2008). These approaches are generally referred to as content-based instruction (CBI) and in the minority language European context, content and language-integrated learning (CLIL; Dalton-Puffer 2011). In a recent review, Stoller (2008) maintains that as yet, ‘the integration of content and language-learning objectives presents challenges for policymakers, programme planners, curriculum designers, teachers, materials writers, teacher educators, teacher supervisors, test writers, and learners’ (65). Moreover, as Duff (2005) states: ‘Explicitly combined L&C [language and content] instruction is less frequently found in mainstream content courses unless major reforms initiated by ESL specialists have been successfully implemented’ (49). As a way forward, teaching academic language across the curriculum, particularly in secondary settings, is a contemporary focus of research in North America, Australia and the UK (Schleppegrell and O’Hallaron 2011). From their review of recent literature, Schleppegrell and O’Hallaron highlight three significant instructional aspects of this approach: providing support for teachers vis-à-vis ‘how language works in their subject areas’; careful unit planning; and scaffolding students’ academic language and content learning simultaneously (3). Other prominent scholars (e.g. Leung and Street 2012) have also called for ‘a more socially and culturally oriented approach to language and literacy’ (3), including in content classrooms. This view holds language as a practice rather than a bounded and fixed system, and as Prinsloo (2012) argues: ‘From this perspective, the idea of “a language” is a misleading shorthand for a diverse range of language varieties, genres, registers and practices’ (23). Researchers adopting this perspective advocate for more multi/plurilingual and multimodal pedagogical approaches to second language content teaching (e.g. Early and Marshall 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas et al. 2009; Cummins and Early 2011; Lin 2012). Our research sought to better understand the integration of language and content and the teaching of academic language in an under-resourced African secondary setting.

Research practices

In our August 2009 research visit, we met with the school principal, teachers and students, explained our research interests and conducted an extended interactive two-day workshop

on the use of the digital equipment we had brought to the school. We administered a detailed questionnaire, conducted a series of focal group interviews with 10 teachers and made observational visits to the teachers' classrooms. We conducted further questionnaires in October 2009 and April 2010, at which time 10 additional teachers who had participated in the workshops joined the research study. Thus, in total, 20 teachers participated in the research process, two of whom were subject English (and English literature) teachers. The remaining 18 teachers represent instruction in a wide range of curricular areas, including humanities (Christian religious education, political education, history and geography; $n = 5$), sciences (biology, chemistry, physics, agriculture; $n = 5$), mathematics ($n = 1$), business studies (computer studies and accounts, $n = 4$), culture (art and crafts $n = 2$), and the school librarian. We continued to maintain regular contact with the school via email, surface mail, telephone and Skype. At the conclusion of the study, in June 2012, we returned to the school for a final round of data collection. We also shared our preliminary analysis with the teachers, and triangulated the findings we already had. In sum, the teachers have shared their insights in multiple data forms, including whole-group meetings, face-to-face interviews, questionnaires, email exchanges, professional conversations, photographs, video footage, and written and audio-taped reflections.

According to Duff (2008), 'qualitative case studies are increasingly associated with *iterative, cyclical, or inductive data analysis*' (159, italics in original), and our procedures conformed with this. The analysis proceeded through three phases. In Phase 1, theme identification and initial coding, we independently read the transcripts and established what we each perceived to be the most salient emerging themes with regard to teaching through English as MoI. In Phase 2, we exchanged our categories of emerging themes and through discussion modified emerging categories. In Phase 3, as an iterative process, we re-analysed the data in more depth according to the established themes as a test for robustness. In this process, some of the themes constructed linked with theoretical and research literature familiar to us; however, there were other unanticipated themes, less familiar, which we categorised from the data. As these latter themes emerged, we turned to further readings, for example, broader language education policies and assessment practices in sub-Saharan Africa, to inform our coding and consolidate salient themes. Thus, the data were analysed inductively and recursively as we drew on the theoretical perspectives and research studies outlined earlier. Triangulation of the data was undertaken by working across the various forms of data collected, as well as by undertaking recurrent analysis. Member check with participating teachers was conducted during the June 2012 visit to verify our emerging themes and inferences from the data and to enhance credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Findings and analysis

We address our findings and analysis with respect to our two research questions outlined earlier: (1) in certain rural African contexts, what educational conditions and language policies impact the use of English as MoI in secondary schools? and (2) how do teachers across the curriculum navigate these conditions and policies to integrate English language and content?

Educational conditions and language policies

Large class sizes and limited resources characterise many African classrooms, including classrooms in rural Uganda, which compromises the quality of teaching, in general, and

the effectiveness of English as MoI in schools (Deininger 2003). Until 1997, only elite children from privileged backgrounds in Uganda who could afford the school fees had access to education. However in 1997, Universal Primary Education (UPE) was introduced, in accordance with the recommendations of a Government White Paper (1992) and honouring a campaign promise by President Museveni, there was a marked increase in enrolment in primary schools from approximately 2.7 million in 1996 to 7.3 million in 2007 (Kyeyune 2011, 87). More recently, since 2007, there has been a policy of Universal Secondary Education (USE) in Uganda, which has put added strain on local resources (UNESCO 2010). It is in these poorly resourced conditions, then, that as Kyeyune (2011) notes: 'although, no definite secondary enrolment figures are available, the rising secondary enrolment means an increased number of beneficiaries who need English' (87). When asked about the challenges they faced, the science teachers gave us a first-hand account of the educational conditions wrought by a policy of USE:

- Kaikaira:** Hmm. One is increasing number of students ... like when it comes to practicalities it becomes a bit difficult to teach because there is not enough.
Bonny: Uh-huh. How many students do you normally have in a class?
Kaikaira: Uh. We can have like eighties ... even a hundred.
Mesusera: In one room.
Mathew: I'm teaching a class of one hundred and eighteen.
Bonny: Never.... you are teaching one hundred and eighteen in one class?
Mathew: Yes. In one class.
Bonny: [Whistles.] That's unbelievable. Is this part of universal secondary education?
Kaikaira: Yes.
Bonny: So these are the numbers that have gone up?
Kaikaira: [in agreement]: Mmm.

While these conditions occurred most dramatically in the maths/sciences, they also occurred across all subject areas. For example, Adam told us, the school has '80 students in each of the three senior English One streams ... and, too, we have very few novels and books'.

The limited resources available for public schools in Uganda have had a marked impact on the conditions, described later, under which teachers at SSS work. SSS was built in 1983 and now houses 700 students and 35 teachers, some part-time or itinerant. The school's red brick, single-storey structures, with grey tin roofs, have crude openings for windows, and ornate metal gratings rather than glass. An electrical pole brings electricity for the first time to just one room in the school. On the school ground are young grazing cattle and a hand-pump well, with villagers lined up to fill their canisters here, their only local water source. One of the school's largest rooms functions as a staff room, computer laboratory and instructional space. It is the single room in the school with (irregular) electricity and contains large laboratory-style wooden tables covered with brightly coloured cloth, multiple hard-backed chairs and about six donated computers (all but one dysfunctional) arranged around the perimeter of the room. There is also a blackboard in front of the room, so ingrained with use that it has virtually lost the ability to be written upon. The school library has few books on its empty shelves and no furniture. Although three science subjects are taught (physics, chemistry and biology), the teachers told us: 'We simply don't have something called a laboratory'. There is limited electricity, no running water and no modern sanitation system.

Such lack of resources is echoed throughout the data-set and needs to be emphasised, as it greatly impacts language and literacy pedagogical practices. The following exchange attests to this:

Bonny (referencing the economics class): Are you saying some students might not have a textbook?

Sam: Yes, sincerely none of my students have a textbook.

Bonny: How do they prepare for examinations?

Sam: They use my notes. That means that I have to transcribe as much as possible, so I provide every detail that they need. This forces me not to give assignments or activities and to create some extra lessons on weekends so we can catch up.

It should be noted that in our experience, this school is typical of schooling in rural Uganda, although conditions are improving.

Teachers had many observations with respect to the poor educational conditions under which they work. Mathew explains, in biology: 'There are no visual aids at all.... no equipment ... they don't really have hands-on activities'. Penina, the English Department Head explains: 'We have very few textbooks. So we also need a photocopy. We don't have a photocopy. And if I have to photocopy I have to pay'. The teachers explained that in an assessment-driven system, the lack of resources forced them into a role Simon portrayed graphically as follows: 'The teacher is just the whole bible'. They feel as though they must spend their time 'standing and delivering' since, Simon continues, 'the students rely on us because they have no other sources of information'.

Moreover, we learned that virtually no parents had had an opportunity to attend secondary school and no means to provide school-related resources or additional academic support in the home: 'They are poor', Kaikaira informed us, with little formal schooling. So social and community resources, too, were lacking for these students vis-à-vis academic language and literacy in either the mother tongue medium (MTM) or English. These conditions are issues of poverty, as much as implications of post-colonial language policy choice.

Regarding language policy, in Uganda, as in many other sub-Saharan African nations, English remains the official MoI from Primary 4 onwards, irrespective of which of the nation's 43 local languages are spoken by students and their families. In densely populated, multiethnic, urban areas, English is used as the MoI throughout students' entire schooling (P1–P12). As is evident in Minister Nsibambi's quote mentioned earlier, success in MoI is equated with success and advancement in school and in society more broadly. As Tembe (2006) elucidates: 'To be educated in Uganda means to be able to speak English' (857). As noted in the literature review, this assessment is supported by other research in sub-Saharan Africa.

Teachers provided important perspectives on the non-material constraints and challenges encountered in students achieving the advanced levels of academic English language and literacy required to succeed in their secondary subject areas and to do well in the examination syllabus (Uganda National Examinations Board). Consistently, the teachers expressed concern regarding the 'sudden jump' from mother tongue (MoI) in lower primary to English (MoI) in Grade 4. They would have preferred a more flexible language education policy. As expressed by one teacher:

I would think that the government should go back to the previous policy. Because, really, the medium of instruction ... and our ... international language or national language, has

remained English ... so I think the policy should go back ... starting with local, but relating it with English.

Martin added, 'Usually, at secondary ... I think there should be an integrated approach ... where this one's not yet understanding something ... you chip in that mother tongue'. However, as Samuel points out:

chipping in, you will find that you find it hard. We [teachers] are subject to transfer nationally ... we *should* incorporate both English and mother tongues. But now the problem lies with the employment of teachers because we have very many languages.

Consequently, the teachers (P1–P12) commonly do not share a mother tongue with their students. This is the case, 'almost in a district like Mbale, even when we speak Lumasaba, Lugisu, we have got different dialects'. Thus, these secondary teachers were concerned that they inherited many problems from elementary where 'we have learners – we have teachers – who speak a different language' and consequently students arrive with insufficient content knowledge, as well as the requisite levels of proficiency in English. Their recommendation was 'try to post teachers in areas or their localities, so that communication becomes easy. Because emphasis is laid on understanding the concepts, not the English language'. However, even then, as policy and community opinion stands, using the mother tongue is problematic. Teachers said that it would be perceived that, 'you are a low-class teacher or you don't know the English well, that's why you are opting to use the vernacular'. And certainly 'you find that ... school rules, strictly English, even if you get students conversing in the vernacular, it is punishable'.

Moreover, the difference in language policy between rural and urban schools, where English is used from P1, was also seen as inequitable and a challenge to rural teachers, as all students are assessed in English using the same standardised examinations. As one teacher describes it:

this one comes with half-baked literacy ... as that one also comes very perfect. When you go to mark national exams, a child from the rural area finds the problem in expressing coherence and comprehension. You know this one from Mbale ... this one is from Kampala ... there is a very big difference there.

Apart from this difference being largely attributed to the use of English from P1 onwards, the teachers felt that there were also different levels of acceptance of English, i.e. varieties of Ugandan English, depending on where the assessors themselves were located. As a teacher explained regarding Kampala and other regions, 'our level of acceptance of English is totally different. So we do the same exams as those from the capital city, Kampala, where we expect the most fluent – [here] is totally different'. It was suggested that, 'if it was decentralized, we marked these examinations at local level, at district level, like it is in UK ... it would be the answer'. Adding to the importance of this, Ruth, a science teacher, explains: 'The assessment is strictly English ... even science. If a student doesn't write – maybe the correct English ... the professor is saying "no". Scientifically the point is there'. To which Bonny seeks clarification: 'So, can you explain to me, if a person thinks he understands the concept, but their English is not good, does that affect the grade, the mark?' Ruth responds: 'Yes, it affects the mark. You feel that this person has tried to bring out a point. But don't know English ... it's not marked correct'.

Educational conditions and language policy clearly have multiple effects on teachers' classroom practice, addressed next.

Classroom practices

We now wish to turn to the three classrooms (science, arts and English) that provide insight into the ways in which teachers navigated educational conditions and language policies in their classrooms, particularly with respect to the integration of language and content. We highlight central themes emerging from classroom observations, interviews with teachers and our own personal reflections, particularly as they relate to our research questions and the review of literature discussed earlier.

The science classroom: 'the teacher is just the whole Bible'

The first classroom we visit is that of Mathew's, a biology teacher of some 20 years' experience. The structure is a bare, large room approximately 25 × 50 feet, with a dirt floor and poor light entering from openings in the walls. The teacher's demonstration platform sits in the centre and there are tables and wooden sitting benches on all four sides. There are 118 students in this class and that morning Mathew had gathered 60 tree cones from the countryside for a lesson on dissecting and classifying different types of seeds and cones. Mathew and his science colleagues told us that in an attempt to navigate constraints, such as lack of resources and students' limited academic language proficiency, discipline-specific vocabulary and concepts are built as Robert describes, 'by giving examples, from the locality' because 'the abstract words, concepts and substance put forward are seemingly out of their world'. Specifically, Mathew states, 'like in biology, for example, we have in Uganda ... we have most of the vegetation and we can use live examples'. So, for hands-on activities, students are dependent on their teacher's initiative and investment in students' learning in the absence of physical resources to integrate their language and content learning. There are no textbooks available for Mathew's class, not even one for the teacher who relies on notes and his descriptive powers to explain scientific concepts and experimental practices to the students. In these conditions, policy notwithstanding, Mathew, Robert and the others report that to aid understanding they 'give them [the students] the explanation in our local vernacular knowledge'. And the teachers report use of 'realia and drawings' and 'demonstrations, illustrations, pictorial representations and charts'. In Mathew's classroom, the blackboard is too worn and too distant from too many to be an effective mediating tool, so Mathew brings in local visual aids and the students note what he describes in their notebooks, as he does everything he can to check as many as possible.

According to the official language policy, in this poorly resourced school, teachers were officially prohibited, by government sanctions, from using one of the few and richest resources readily available: their students' background knowledge encoded in their mother tongue. The following exchange highlights the tensions and dilemmas in trying to navigate what is best for students' learning:

Margaret: So, how are the language demands in science for the students?

Kaikaira: You're very right. The language is a problem because we are in a rural setting and most of the scientific names are the one thing that we have to teach in English. There is a difficulty for those from the community – the teacher is insisting on English and the child wants to speak the local language.

Bonny: Does the teacher use it to help the students sometimes?

Speakers: Hmmm.

Kaikaira: We are condemned if we do ... because we are not doing the right thing.

Musa: And the learners can report you to the principal – and it goes in our record book.

Kaikaira: because we are supposed to punish them for speaking the local language.

In this small exchange and from others like it, we learned very clearly that the subject teachers do expect to teach the specialised language of their subject areas. In our experience, this is not always the case with their North American counterparts. Subject-specific vocabulary was discussed, and teachers, in later questionnaires, also identify particular genres they sought to help the students understand and construct related to their disciplines. For example, Robert, the science teacher, reported that the most common genres that the students must understand when reading are *descriptions, classification, steps and procedures, cause-effect and explanation*. Kaikaira, regarding teaching maths, explained that he had to teach *the language of working through the steps and procedures* and giving *explanations for their reasoning*. They all reported that they had had no training to do this and so the focus was mostly on vocabulary/concepts rather than explicit teaching of genres. To support the learners and navigate language and content teaching, 'It is via experimentation and hands-on as often as possible'. Mathew explains that he tries to 'offer as many home-related substitutes for examples as possible' to make concrete the content abstractions and teach the language.

We also sensed, as evidenced from comments from focus group interviews reported earlier regarding educational conditions and language policy, that the teachers would have made greater judicious use of the mother tongue in their classrooms if language policies were more flexible. Clearly, some codeswitching occurred between teachers and learners and learners amongst themselves, but within limits and fearfully.

The arts classroom: 'imagined designs'

The next class we enter is that of Najia's, the Deputy Head and art and textiles teacher, with 25 years of experience. On entering the classroom of 40 students, we notice immediately that it is devoid of art supplies. The students have some paper and pencils but virtually no paints, fabrics or printing pastes. To compensate, Najia brings to class resources from the local natural world, as well as examples of supplies for the students to touch, sense and feel. Najia uses rich and vivid (English) language, some common usage, some technical, to provide the theory and to paint a mental picture for the students of what they might envisage by way of design. He draws upon the realia that he has to hand, both the objects collected and materials, to illustrate and illuminate the abstract images created verbally. The students draft their designs in black and white on paper, considering what colours, fabrics and patterns they would employ if they were to use the actual materials. As they work to help each other realise their imagined designs, the students draw from their knowledge encoded in both English and mother tongue.

Here again issues arise of conditions and policy and impact on language and literacy practices. Najia told us regarding materials: 'We can't afford it. A kilogram of printing paste is twelve thousand shillings so that's pretty expensive for the school'. Instead, samples are brought. 'Everyone gets to touch it, gets the feel – then when the two examination times – we try the practical at least once or twice'. In the absence of materials themselves, teacher and learners work from abstraction towards concretisation.

Frequently scholars (e.g. Kyeyune 2003, 2011; Clegg and Afitska 2011) note that teachers may not be fluent in the European language of instruction. We did not find this to be the case. Indeed, we were struck by the teachers' excellent command of English. In Najia's, as in Mathew's classroom, students have rich linguistic input supported by locally gathered visual aids. Ironically, ideas and practices were elaborated upon in vivid descriptive language, due in some measure to the absence of supplies, so that, as Najia puts it, 'you are [linguistically] just building an idea – that idea – that explanation takes

time for somebody to grasp'. To which Simon adds, 'I think that it would stick much better if they can see it and internalise it themselves'. However, in Najia's class, in the current context of few written resources to learn and study from, students support each other to concretise and internalise the abstraction orally conveyed.

While Najia reported that he rarely used the mother tongue, when Bonny inquired, 'I know the teacher is trying to speak English, but do students talk to each other – help each other – in the local language?' Najia responded, 'yes, they do', to which Simon concurred with an affirmative 'mmm'. Such responses are in keeping with Clegg and Afitska's (2011) point that 'group talk is largely in L1 (Brock-Utne 2004; Probyn 2005; Arthur and Martin 2006)' (64) since learners are not fluent enough to engage in it in L2. The students in Najia's design class could potentially draw on local terms to describe the knowledge of the materials and shapes encoded in the local language but move across languages to the more technical terms that they had learned only in English. They also made meaning multimodally through visual images and imagined designs, with colour and textures. Such group communication practices, using the full range of linguistic and semiotic systems that the students have available to them, have a high potential to support the students' grasp of new concepts and to apply them in the practical terms on which they will be assessed in the standard exams. In this classroom context, it is particularly difficult to understand why L1 use would not serve the students well in this examinable subject in art and design. It is a classic example of how a top-down national language policy might not be pedagogically appropriate at grassroots level and warrants further inquiry.

The English classroom: the community speaks 'broken English'

Our final classroom is that of Penina, the Head English Teacher with 25 years' experience. The room is equally sparse and poorly resourced, and Penina has used her own small earnings to pay for photocopying so that her students might have some materials to read and share. There are 80 students in her English class, organised into discussion groups. The students are very shy and reluctant to speak in English. When they do, they use the local vernacular English that contains words and idioms unique to Uganda, and this shows up in their written texts. This is of great concern to Penina, who regularly teaches grammar points and corrects students' usage to 'standard English', as students will be heavily penalised if they use vernacular in the national English examinations. However, while Penina holds strong to the use of 'standard English', she urgently seeks local Ugandan content for her class materials. What she dearly wants is to build a local repository of exam-set English stories rewritten across time and space to be relocated in contemporary Uganda. In the absence of such materials, she innovatively asks the students to retell the set narratives, changing the location to rural Uganda and the names of the character to Ugandan names, and to infuse the stories/plays with both local cultural practices of contemporary relevance to Ugandan society.

Duff (2005) and Kyeyune (2011) both speak to the perceived leadership role of the English language teacher in school programmes to support students' learning in English in subjects across the curriculum. It is particularly important then to understand what concepts of 'English' are held by the English teacher, and what teaching methods have been encouraged in teacher education courses. The lessons we learnt from Penina's class is that English is a school subject in which there is a focus on 'correct' usage. While Penina innovatively organises activities in drama, debates, topic questions and discussions, and frequently employs poetry, song, music and dance in her classes, she tells us:

‘The students tend to fear, they shy away [from these practices] ... because they fear to make mistakes’. From Penina’s perception, the ‘mistakes’ come from ‘first language transference’. Moreover, ‘when they [students] transfer, they actually write that English and it’s grammatically ... wrong’.

According to Penina and Adam, a recently graduated English teacher, this ‘interference’ affects not only grammar but occurs at all levels, including ‘pronunciation’ which they work to ‘correct’ (which affects ‘spelling’) and semantics. For example, as Adam explains, ‘we have a problem with the word “uncle” and “aunt” which the students take to mean “anyone older than you related or not”’. The two teachers perceived that the ‘poor models’ in the community compounded the problem in the use of the local English vernacular that the students get ‘from the people around – the businessmen – who speak broken English’. Arguably, English here is idealised as the ‘Queen’s English’. Kyeyune (2011) explains how this view of English is constructed for Ugandan English teachers from the joint forces of ‘university academic programs that produce teachers with in-depth knowledge of linguistics that they cannot use to equip students with the competencies that [contemporary] society demands’ and ‘an assessment system that emphasizes grades based on “correct” usage’.

The English teachers in our study were, like their colleagues, in many regards inspirational. They were resourceful, creative and invested in their teaching in arduous circumstances. While open to and appreciative of new perspectives in our professional conversations, they had been socialised, not unlike the majority of their counterparts in industrialised countries, to a view of English as a set system and syllabus, and had little opportunity to explore English as a social practice and meaning-making system with great variation across sociolinguistic situations. Debates on English as a lingua franca or ‘World Englishes’ have not been part of their training, most likely because the examination system is structured on knowledge of standard English. Nor, we discovered from our questionnaire, had any of the teachers received training in language awareness or in teaching through a foreign language as an MoI.

We noted, however, while some students were reluctant to speak for fear of making mistakes, other students held a view of English as a system for meaning-making, as a set of social practices, rather than as a set body of knowledge. This view caused tensions with their English teachers around examination times. Adam told us: ‘Students normally look at English as a language and so as if there is no material to revise’. Penina elaborated: ‘They always tell me, “English is spoken everywhere, all the teachers of different subjects are teaching English – in English – and we learn it from the English teacher, so we don’t see the reason why we should revise”’. Kyeyune (2003) also reports that an English teacher informed her that ‘the students think English is natural and they don’t need to spend their time on it like they do on other subjects’ (175). Achieving a common understanding across stakeholders regarding what they mean by English is an important challenge that needs to be addressed if there is to be effective use of resources – digital or otherwise – across the curriculum. We turn now to a summary and discussion of our findings, before drawing some conclusions and (cautious) recommendations.

Discussion

In this paper, we sought to address two central questions. First, in a rural African context, what educational conditions and language policies impact the use of English as MoI in secondary schools? and second, how do teachers across the curriculum navigate these conditions and policies to integrate language and content teaching?

In response to the first question, with respect to conditions and policies, the challenges and constraints are multifold. They include lack of material resources and large classes; problems with the inflexible language education policy and the difficulties secondary teachers inherit with ‘the sharp jump’ to English in Grade 4; the different mother tongues in classrooms, even in rural areas, and the time and skill it takes when codeswitching effectively; that P1–P12 teachers are moved from region to region without regard for language proficiency in the dominant language of the region; that in public opinion, use of the mother tongue as an instructional strategy positions secondary teachers as incompetent; that assessment practices are standardised whereas language policy varies from urban to rural; and that assessors accept different varieties of Ugandan English over others and that in the content areas, students must demonstrate conceptual knowledge ‘in “correct” standard English’. In these conditions, teachers feel under great pressure to teach content and monolingual English while in their everyday experiences, students’ low achievement rates and high drop out rates compel them to explore alternative pedagogies.

So, in response to question two, in the context of such oppressive conditions and inflexible language education policy, teachers exercise agency and make great efforts to address both the language and content needs to their students. They use multimodal pedagogical approaches: spatial, performative, visuals, and demonstrations, and draw on available local resources, together with students’ background knowledge, to make abstractions more concrete and to scaffold students’ language and content learning. Wherever possible, they provide the students with rich linguistic input, scaffolded by other modes, and walk a fine line in the use of codeswitching in their classroom practices, although because of the examinations, they correct and assess not only content knowledge but also ‘correct’ English usage.

Reflecting on this, one critical complicating factor is striking: in using English as the MoI with such efforts and such poor results, a form of ‘revisionism’ has commonly taken place (Heugh 2009) in its implementation in schools. Our findings support the view held by other researchers (see e.g. Heugh 2009) who have reported a serious misuse and misinterpretation of the theories of scholars such as Cummins (1984) and Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins (1988) on the role of MTM instruction to be intended as short-lived, in a transition programme with an early exit (after P3) to English. This fails to acknowledge the work of Cummins (1981), supported by others (e.g. Thomas and Collier 2002; Spolsky and Shohamy 1999), that it takes on average upwards of seven years for English language learners to reach native speaker norms, during which time the mother tongue should also be developed and serve to support achievement in learning. Notwithstanding this research, official policy is frequently understood to mandate an ‘English Only’ approach, as Clegg and Afitska (2011) show in their comprehensive review of the literature, and use of mother-tongue in codeswitching ‘is common, but rarely officially sanctioned’. We draw on our findings and the literature reviewed in making some recommendations to stimulate future discussion and action.

Conclusion and recommendations

While the material resources we can bring to places like SSS are paltry with respect to the needs of the community, what we hope to contribute to this rural Ugandan community, and perhaps other communities struggling with English as MoI policies, is our perspective on the ways in which language policies, despite best intentions, might, like other ‘placed resources’, become dysfunctional when moved from global to local contexts, and from relatively well-resourced urban areas to poorly resourced rural communities (see also

Benson 2009). We also hope to contribute our perspectives regarding possibilities to support classroom practices. So, in conclusion, we present what our findings may offer as a way forward:

- (1) Language education policies should be informed by current theories and research on bi/multilingual education rather than forms of 'revisionism' and 'misunderstandings' (Heugh 2009) of this work. However, even then, resultant policies and practices should not 'travel' without careful attention to locality. Like Canagarajah (2005), we recommend a 'reclaiming of the local in language policy and practice' and, like Ramanathan and Morgan (2007), attest that there is an urgent need for greater attention to the implications of locality in policy research and enhanced practitioner agency in the process.
- (2) Language education policies and practices, both pedagogical and assessment, should be informed by perspectives from interactional sociolinguistics (Blommaert 2010; Makoni and Pennycook 2007), which challenge the concept of language/s, as having 'fixed' boundaries between them. These scholars take the position that linguistic resources are dynamic evolving systems that are realised relative to particular locality. Thus, unattainable notions of teaching to 'standards' of 'Queen's' or 'Kampala' English need to be redressed.
- (3) Community organisations, parents, educators, politicians and policymakers need to be better informed about the evidence-based understanding of the length of time required for learners to achieve levels of advanced L2 language and literacy for successful achievement in content area classrooms and the value of long term, 'strong' bi/plurilingual education in attaining those ends.
- (4) Teacher education programmes should include providing teachers with opportunities to understand and explore language as a social practice and meaning making system, with great variation across sociolinguistic situations. Teachers should be supported to become more aware of how language works in their subject areas and to design units of work and tasks that scaffold students' academic language and content learning simultaneously. Bi/plurilingual and multimodal pedagogies where teachers develop expertise in effectively teaching for transfer across languages and across modes should be explored.
- (5) Inequities in assessment practices should be redressed. As Shohamy (2011) compellingly argues, proposals need to be developed whereby 'mixing languages is a legitimate act that does not result in penalties but rather is [viewed as] an effective means of expressing and communicating ideas that cannot be transmitted in one language' (427). Given the length of time to develop academic language proficiency, learners should be rewarded for what they can do with language/s and their content knowledge rather than being penalised because of perceived 'deficits' in 'standard' English.
- (6) Researchers and teachers need to engage in collaborative, capacity building, action research. Case studies of the enactment of policies and transformative pedagogical practices need to be undertaken to inform both policymakers and practitioners, from the grassroots. We link this recommendation to our first. Enhanced and well supported practitioner agency is a critical component in the understanding of how language education policies, as 'placed resources', travel to good effect and how to simultaneously integrate language and content learning in poorly resourced schools.

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Notes

1. Research has addressed language policy (Norton and Mutonyi 2010; Tembe and Norton 2008), health literacy (Jones and Norton 2007; Kendrick and Mutonyi 2007), multimodal pedagogy (Kendrick et al. 2006), digital literacy (Mutonyi and Norton 2007; Norton, Early, and Tembe 2010; Norton and Williams 2012), researcher identity (Norton and Early 2011) and narrative inquiry (Early and Norton 2013).
2. A number of these recommendations were presented to the Ugandan Ministry of Education representatives at a meeting in Kampala, June 2012.

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