A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Language-in-Education Policies And Their Implementations in Developing Countries: The Case of Selected Asian and African Countries

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Abstract

Many nations have attempted to create different language-in-education policies that would cater not only to the needs of learners but also to the demands of preserving a country's native languages. The emergence of multilingual education has led to a proliferation of research that shows the benefits of using a learner's first language. These issues have led the authors to investigate the different language-in-education policies of Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Botswana, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda, and how they establish students' first languages as a medium of instruction. This paper examined 30 research articles with the goal of providing an in-depth understanding of each country's policies and implementation practices. The study also explored the different challenges and pedagogical implications of these policies to better understand emerging issues and insights. An identified issue is the devaluation of one's first language due to people's negative perspectives and poor policy planning. It was also not surprising that most of these developing communities understand the importance of English as a language of globalization. Thus, emphasizing the importance of establishing one's first language and strengthening the use of the English language in educational systems are two important considerations for policy planning.

Keywords: multilingual education, language-in-education policy, first language, multilingualism

Introduction

The year 2015 marks the 15ᵗʰ anniversary of International Mother Language Day. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), there are approximately 7,000 languages spoken around the world, but only 300 that are widely spoken (2003). While some countries, such as Iceland, are linguistically homogenous, most countries show an abundance of linguistic diversity, such as Indonesia with over 700 languages and Papua New Guinea with over 800 languages. Additionally, UNESCO strongly believes that language is a fundamental attribute of cultural identity and empowerment, both for the individual and the group.

Although language plays a vital role in education and transmission of knowledge, there have been arguments regarding which language is the most appropriate as a medium of instruction, specifically in a multilingual setting. In recent years, numerous scholars (e.g., Dumatog & Dekker, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2013; Malone, 2007) have documented the benefits of using the learner's first language as the medium of instruction. Inside the classroom, students use their first languages, for this is the language they learned first, identify with, and know best.

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Students in diverse ethno-linguistic communities are still beset with problems, even with great support from their governments. First, some have no access to education at all and second, many of those who do have access cannot speak the official language when they enter the system. According to UNESCO (2003), students who speak their first language, which is not the same as the official language, find their language, knowledge, and experience to be a disadvantage. Malone (2007) has documented the consequences of this situation for many students, for example, loss of confidence, inability to learn, dropping out of school, and alienation from heritage and culture. Facing these challenges in multilingual educational systems, Malone (2007) further explained that mother tongue-based multilingual education is the most appropriate means for ensuring quality education for the ethno-linguistic communities who speak non-dominant languages.

Ball (2011) stated that early learners begin to establish their identities and relationships through communicating meaningfully in their first language. Through observation and interaction with family and friends, learners develop knowledge and experience (Hart & Risley, 1995), thus, students' language, knowledge, and experience are the "foundation for their learning in the classroom" (Malone, 2007, p. 1). Furthermore, UNESCO (2008) agrees that appropriate language education is essential for students to ensure quality education, to learn throughout their lives, and to have access to information. These recommendations pose a challenge for policy-makers concerned with ensuring qualifications of a normative nature for their respective countries, while at the same time protecting the right to be different for those belonging to specific linguistic and ethnic populations. For UNESCO, education is both a tool and a reflection of cultural diversity.

These issues led us to investigate the different language-in-education policies of selected Asian and African countries. Using different research articles from developing countries, we employed meta-analysis to provide an in-depth understanding of the different implications of these policies. Moreover, we sought to find out how these policies have used the learners' first languages and how these languages were incorporated in classroom settings. Finally, the study explores pedagogical issues and insights for the improvement of using a learner's first language as a medium of instruction.

Mother Tongue as Medium of Instruction

Mother Tongue-Based (MTB) instruction generally refers to the use of a learners' mother tongue as a medium of instruction. This kind of instruction might be integrated as part of bilingual or multilingual education programs. It is "a system of multilingual education which begins with or is based on the learners' first language or mother tongue" (Kosonen & Young, 2009, p. 13). Furthermore, this instruction is especially beneficial to early learners when they are still learning to read and gaining the mathematical and scientific concepts taught in school. UNESCO strongly believes that learners' mother tongues can be a bridge language of instruction that can help build a culturally and linguistically appropriate educational foundation as they will be beneficial to students' life-long learning.

Research Questions

The present study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the different language-in-education policies implemented in the selected countries from Asia and Africa (Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Botswana, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda)?
2. What are the common challenges in implementing these language-in-education policies?
3. What are the pedagogical implications of these policies for the selected countries?

Methodology

This paper employs meta-analysis (Glass, 1976). According to Glass (1976), a meta-analysis is a synthesized work of various individual studies with the purpose of examining relationships among the features and results of the studies. In addition, Glass explained that this process "connotes a rigorous alternative to the casual, narrative discussions of research studies which typify our attempts to make sense of the rapidly expanding research literature" (p. 3). Correspondingly, Lyons (2003) pointed out that this kind of research method "provides [a] strong alternative to the more traditional review methods" (p. 13).

Selection of Countries

This study investigated different research articles that presented the language-in-education policies and their implementation in selected Asian and African countries. The countries were selected based on their similar status as developing countries and how these countries implement language-in-education policies. According to the World Economic Outlook database, these countries were considered developing due to their economic and commercial growth. Secondly, the countries that were considered in this study were able to provide an understanding of how linguistic diversity affected the use and learning of a language among different social contexts. Moreover, the choice of the countries from the two continents was based on their rich historical and political backgrounds, which may have affected their educational systems, specifically their language policies and the perceptions of the people with their own local and national languages. The countries included in this meta-analysis are the Philippines, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Kenya, South Africa, Rwanda, Uganda, Botswana, and Tanzania.

Selection of Studies

This meta-analysis aims to present a selection of relevant studies on the language-in-education policies of selected Asian and African countries over the last 10 years (2004-2015). Different articles about these countries' educational policies were chosen because they discussed non-native learners of English and how they could be affected by the use of their first language in instruction. Moreover, these studies offered a substantial analysis on how these developing countries have adapted to different educational reforms and standards. Most of the countries selected implemented a mother tongue as part of their curriculum. It is important to understand whether the linguistic diversity of these two continents could help or whether it could pose challenges to the implementation of curricula. The research papers were selected based on the following criteria: (a) the paper discussed a language-in-education policy of a developing country with a specific focus on the use of learners' first languages as a medium of instruction and (b) the paper presented various reflections on emerging issues in implementation.

Analytical Procedure

In this study, 30 research papers that were written about the selected countries were analyzed (see Appendix 1). Journal articles were selected from various publications such as IAFOR Journal of Language Learning, European Journal of Research & Reflection in Education Sciences, International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education & Development, International Journal of Multilingualism, Springer Open Journal, International Journal of Educational Development, POLIS Journal, International Research on Social Sciences, Journal of Education & Practice, International Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences, British Council, The African Symposium, and SEAMEO.

After the research papers were selected, they were individually analysed to determine the language-in-education policy of a country, its contextual background, and the challenges of implementation. Results were then compared with the other countries included in the overall analysis. Finally, patterns and similarities in the guiding policies and implementation challenges were noted and analysed.

Findings

Overview of Language-in-Education Policies

Table 1 below shows an estimate of the number of languages spoken, official languages, and languages used as a medium of instruction in the selected countries, and verified through Ethnologue—a comprehensive online catalogue of world languages. Among them, Rwanda has the least number of languages being spoken by its populace, having only three languages: Kinyarwanda, English, and French. On the other hand, the Philippines has the highest degree of linguistic diversity with more than 180 languages spoken across the archipelago.

Almost all the countries under study have two or more official languages including English, except for Thailand which only has one official language, Thai. According to Prapasapong (2009), standard Thai is considered the official and legal language, and is used across different areas in Thai society, including national activities, textbooks, mass communication, and print media. This might also be attributed to the historical fact that Thailand is the only Southeast Asian nation that was not directly colonized, which would have likely introduced foreign languages into the country. This is in contrast to the other countries, which were colonized by Western powers and whose perspectives about language have been imposed; the colonial impositions may have also influenced how these colonized countries perceive their own languages (Rassool, 1998). This is true with countries like Botswana, Kenya, and Brunei Darussalam which became British colonies, thus the use of English as one of their principal languages. This was also the case with Rwanda, a French colony, which used French as a principal language until 2008 when it was discarded due to the negative history associated with the language (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

When it comes to languages used in classrooms, both Cambodia and Thailand use a local language while all the other countries—except Rwanda—employ a local language and English. Surprisingly, this is not the case with Rwanda. Although Rwanda has two official languages, Kinyarwanda and English, only English is being used as an official language for instruction.

With this in mind, it is not surprising to note then that English is likewise used as a language of instruction in most of these countries; something that is not observable in Cambodia and Thailand. Under the 2007 Law on Education in Cambodia, the Khmer language should be the language of instruction "in order to strengthen the local knowledge, cultures, and languages of ethnic minorities" (Sun, 2009, p. 64). Other than English, 10 of these countries still use a local language in the classroom except for Rwanda, which adopted English as the sole language of instruction as stipulated in their New Language Policy (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

This data highlights the linguistic diversity of the two continents under study. It is therefore beneficial to examine how these countries acknowledge this linguistic heterogeneity in the formulation of their existing language-in-education policies, specifically the implementation of first language-based education.

Table 2 illustrates the different language-in-education policies of the selected countries. It shows that most of the selected countries would use the local language of the community during primary school and then transition to the national language, or English, with the exceptions of Brunei, Botswana, and Rwanda. Nonetheless, these policies do share some similarities. One of these is the use of the first language in the formative years of schooling, such as in the Philippines, Kenya, and Uganda where it is used for instruction until grade 3; after which, English is used as the language of instruction. Contrary to this, Tanzania is the only country which uses the first language throughout primary school, and only uses English at the start of secondary school (see Table 2); in Malaysia, the first language is studied as a separate subject.

On the other hand, Brunei Darussalam implements a bilingual policy which only promotes Standard Malay as the language of instruction of pre-primary and primary schooling and uses English in the higher levels. Botswana and Rwanda are the only countries in the study which use English as the sole language of instruction beginning in grade 1.

Table 1
Official Languages of the Selected Countries

Country	Number of languages spoken	Official Languages	Languages of instruction
Brunei Darussalam	15	Standard Malay, English	Standard Malay, English
Cambodia	23	Khmer, English	Khmer
Malaysia	140	Standard Malay, English, Tamil, Mandarin Chinese	Standard Malay, English, Tamil, Mandarin Chinese
Philippines	186	Filipino, English	English. Filipino, First Language (called Mother Tongue in the curriculum)
Thailand	74	Thai	Thai, First Language
Botswana	28	Setswana, English	Setswana, English
Kenya	68	Setswana, Kiswahili, English	First Language, English, Kiswahili
Rwanda	3	Kinyarwanda, English	English
South Africa	32	Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, Zulu	First Language, English
Tanzania	127	English, Swahili	First Language, English
Uganda	41	English, Ganda, Swahili	First Language, English

Socio-Political and Pedagogical Issues
Mother Tongue Devaluation

With the growing influence of English language imperialism in the past decades, there has been a shift in education systems (Canagarajah, 1999 in Wa-Mbaleka, 2015). Scholars have been critical that the *Englishization* of language in education could be a threat to indigenous languages. Concurrently, UNESCO (2005) has found that there has been a significant rise in the number of endangered indigenous languages because of the popularity of Western languages, specifically English.

Noor Azam (2005), noted that children in Brunei have been more inclined towards using English, especially the elite and well-educated, creating Malay-English bilingual Bruneians; this could be due to the country's historical association with Britain. Brunei's Ministry of Education believed that indigenous languages "cannot perform the formal and official function as a language of education, compared to Malay and English" (Jones, 2009, p. 12).

These findings are similar to those of Posel and Casale (2011), which demonstrated that English was preferred by South African parents and school administrators due to its promised economic and social benefits. Similarly, the Rwandan government has justified switching to English as their language of instruction as it is seen as the leading language of science, commerce, and economic growth.

Table 2

An Overview of the Language-in-education Policies of the Selected Countries

Country	Language-in-education policy
Brunei Darussalam	*Dwibahasa Policy* or Bilingual Policy (Standard Malay is used at pre-primary and primary and English is a more prominent medium in higher levels)
Cambodia	The Education Law of 2007 gives authorities the right to choose the language(s) of instruction. First language bilingual education programs have been implemented.
Malaysia	The Constitution guarantees people's freedom to learn any language, as well as preservation of non-dominant language. The first language of the students is studied as subjects called Pupil's Own Language (POL) but with conditions; these are taught in primary grades 3 to 6, but not used for other subjects.
Philippines	Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (MTB-MLE is a salient part of the implementation of the K to 12 Basic Education Program.) First language is used in the first three grades, transitioning to instruction in English and Filipino from grades 4 onwards.
Thailand	The Office of the Primary Education Commission encourages the use of first language as language of instruction and teaches Thai as second language. *Patani Malay-Thai Bilingual/Multilingual Education* (PM-MLE, uses both Thai and Patani Malay as languages of instruction)
Botswana	Public schools use English as a language of instruction from Grade 2; English is a subject from grade 1.
Kenya	In rural places, the first language is the language of instruction and is taught as a subject for grade 1 to grade 3. In grade 4, English is the language of instruction and first language is *banished* for it is considered to interfere with the mastery of English. In urban centers, English or Kiswahili is used as a language of instruction for grades 1 to 3, and then English starting in grade 4.
Rwanda	New Language Policy; there is no more French, English is the sole language of instruction, studying in English from Grade 1.
South Africa	The South Africa Schools Act of 1996 transfers the responsibility of formulating suitable language policies to the provincial government and gives school governing bodies the right to choose the languageof instruction. South Africa's Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) of 1997, promotes *additive bilingualism* (i.e., first language is used as language of instruction but at the same time acquire second language skills).
Tanzania	Tanzania, together with Ethiopia, is the only other country that still uses its first language throughout primary school and English in secondary education.
Uganda *these are schools with special cases*	Thematic Curriculum (2007) Local Language Policy: In grades 1-3, the first languageof the child is used as the language of instruction and English is introduced as a subject. In grade 4, both English and the local language are used, with a gradual transition from local languages to English. By the end of grade 4, the first language would be used for explaining the most difficult concepts while written materials, including textbooks and assessments were in simple English. In upper primary education, English is used across the country and the final Primary Leaving Examination [PLE] is conducted in English. *In urban areas or boarding schools which enroll students from all over the country, English is used as the language of instruction and assessment at all grade levels.

There is also a discrepancy when it comes to the prioritization of the non-dominant languages as can be seen with the languages used in education by these countries. For instance, the Philippines has more than 180

languages and Malaysia has approximately 140 languages but there are only very limited orthographies available. The same was noted by Nkosana (2011), in that some local languages in Botswana still do not have orthographies. Most of the languages that do not have orthographies are considered non-dominant languages of the country, which would make it much more difficult to develop textbooks and educational references in these languages.

Poor Planning

Some of the challenges that have been pointed out by scholars with regards to the implementation of mother tongue based-multilingual education (MTB-MLE) were mainly caused by a nations' poor, or lack of, policy planning. Some of these drawbacks are due to the unavailability of instructional materials, lack of teacher training, and the perception that local languages may not be important and may simply be a disadvantage to future employability.

Wa-Mbaleka (2014a) found that teachers were not prepared with proper training and resources for teaching in a first language. This corresponds with the findings of Gacheche (2010) that some Kenyan teachers lacked the ability to teach in a first language. He also pointed out the erroneous assumption that if a teacher can speak a child's first language or L1 then they can teach using the language, leading to the educational ministry's absence of specific training for these L1 teachers. He further added that there has been a lack of policy incentives and political will in the implementation of the program.

Similar challenges have been experienced in South Africa. Posel and Casale (2011) observed that schools were still under-resourced and overcrowded. Many teachers did not receive proper training to teach core subjects in a language in which they might not be proficient, resulting in teachers code-mixing and code-switching.

These drawbacks might have been prevented if policy makers first made sure of the preparedness of every element of the program. Instructional materials should have been given a top priority because these resources guide both students and teachers in using a first language for learning different subjects. Additionally, teachers must have proper training not just with the content of their subjects, but also how this content can be taught using students' first languages. Teachers should receive specialized training in pedagogical strategies utilizing the mother tongue for instruction. Lastly, there should be unity and participation among the people of the community to successfully implement an educational policy—especially with the promotion of a first language inside the classroom—as documented in the Lubuagan community's success in using first language instruction with their students (Dekker & Dumatog, 2003).

Emerging Insights

The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), regards mother languages as vital for children in their formative years (Gacheche, 2010). This viewpoint is shared by the countries mentioned earlier in this study as evidenced by their use of mother tongues in the first years of primary education. However, as mentioned in the previous section, lack of priority given to the first language after the first years does not guarantee the same amount of success in the new language as assumed by curriculum designers. Therefore, one possible way of responding to this issue is the use of a paradigm called additive multilingualism, as proposed by Samuelson and Freedman (2010) for Rwanda. Instead of English as the sole medium of instruction, they said there is much potential for success if the local language, Kinyarwanda, were used as the language of instruction in primary school and maintained as students continue to learn and be proficient in other languages.

This highlights that one issue among the selected countries is first language devaluation. If some, residents of a country—if not most—think that their first language lacks social and economic importance, which prohibits its use and relevance, that can decrease the value and importance of the first language. They will continue to think that their first language does not have the ability to aid them in social and economic mobility. Therefore, the perception that a country is better off learning in English after a few years of using a first language may not only create linguistically incompetent learners but also ethnolinguistically apathetic citizens (see Adegbija, 2001).

However, it should not be misunderstood that advocating first language education devalues English. Looking at the collection of articles considered in this study, it is also worth mentioning that most of these developing communities still consider the linguistic capital English offers them. According to Bourdieu (1977), linguistic capital is a form of cultural capital which gives prestige or favorable currency to certain linguistic capabilities, such as speaking the English language, as compared to being competent with a home language.

The Rwandan government looks at this through a lens which considers English as the leading language of science, commerce, and economic development (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). A similar case was observed in South Africa by Posel and Casale (2011), as discussed in the previous section. Another example of this is in Botswana where parents also prefer their children to learn and speak in English for its social and economic benefits (Nkosana, 2011). Pennycook (1994) believed that the global influence of English would make it difficult, if not impossible, to prioritize Kiswahili over English in Tanzania.

Conclusion

This meta-analysis has provided a synthesized overview of different language-in-education policies of representative developing countries from Asia and Africa. These policies all center on the place of first languages in education. The paper has also presented several issues common to most of these countries. These issues were synthesized into two main frames—the devaluation of a first language and poor policy-planning. In response to these, the researchers have shared derived insights and offered possible solutions. The researchers recommend a review of the policies that were noted as problematic both on paper and in practice. Considering the limitations of this paper, it is also recommended that further studies be conducted on the progress of the implementation of the programs several years after they have been carried out. With the findings and insights gained through this meta-analysis, the researchers conclude that the importance of improving first language education should always be a top priority as it will provide the scaffolding to learning other languages such as English. Even though English is closely associated with success and economic mobility, policy developers should continue to look at the need to initially introduce and deepen students' first languages; this can only be successfully done if all facets of the policy (i.e., teacher training, availability of instructional materials, stakeholder involvement) are carefully considered. After all, multilingual nations should look at their ethnolinguistic diversity as an asset and not as a liability.

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Appendix A
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