

The Contemplations on the Attempted Extermination of African Indigenous Languages

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Abstract

Forty three percent of the 6000 languages spoken in the world are endangered, and of these, many belong to indigenous peoples. In 2012, Uganda initiated a process of undertaking a reform of the lower secondary education curriculum where indigenous languages were scrapped from the curriculum. Concerted efforts from stakeholders were initiated to resist the move. To understand the complexity of the proposed reform and the eventual reactions thereafter, the researcher had to be guided by the Practice-Based Theory of Professional Education. Using naturalistic approaches, the researcher found out that there was no viable justification for removing indigenous languages from the curriculum. Hence, stakeholders' resistance led to the subsequent inclusion of indigenous languages in the curriculum. The researcher therefore recommends an urgent need to implement the Government White Paper on Education of 1992 to its fullness because it stipulates the position of indigenous languages in education and development.

Keywords: Uganda's education system, Luganda language education, Indigenous languages, curriculum reform, Language education

Objectives

The study set out to:

1. Assess the contents of the proposed lower secondary school curriculum.
2. Analyse the attitudes of stakeholders towards the contents of the proposed lower secondary school curriculum.
3. Examine strategies put in place to restore indigenous languages in the proposed curriculum in order to prevent their future annihilation.

Theoretical review

In order to understand the complexity of the proposed reform and analyse its contents in an educational perspective, the author had to be guided by the Practice-Based Theory of professional education advanced by Ball and Cohen (1999). The theory aims at building and sustaining a community of practitioners who collectively seek human and social improvement. Consequently, it underscores the significance of thoughtful discussion among learners and teachers as an essential element of any meaningful education. The theory goes on to agitate for an inquiry-oriented education which is centred in practice (Ball & Cohen, 1999). The premises upon which the theory rests are significant to any meaningful education reform, and the language of instruction is paramount in this endeavour. Since the publication of the UNESCO Report on the Use of Vernacular languages in Education in 1953, attempts have been made by African countries to transform their education from the theoretical educational systems to transformative and demand driven systems (Alidou et. al, 2006). Such an appropriate education system would be characterized by the use of a familiar medium of instruction, utilisation of adequate teaching techniques, and use of a suitable curriculum and provision of adequate instructional materials (Alidou et. al 2006). African indigenous languages would be significant in and appropriate in this endeavour.

It should be noted that ‘children perform better in schools when the school effectively teaches the mother tongue and, where appropriate, develops literacy in that language’ (Shoebottom, 2009; Government White Paper on Education, 1992). In the process of acquiring a language a child learns a set of skills and implicit meta-linguistic knowledge which Cummins termed as the Common Underlying Proficiency – CUP (Shoebottom, 2009). The CUP is important not only in the learning of other curricula content but also in the overall acquisition of skills and attitudes during the teaching-learning process. Indigenous languages and mother tongue in specific form the base upon which CUP is developed. Consequently, CUP provides the foundation for children to learn the second language and other subjects.

Methodology

The study took on a naturalistic approach involving ethnographic modes of inquiry. The true-to-life approach was chosen because of its descriptiveness and holistic manner in which data are collected from participants in a naturalistic context (Creswell, 2009; **Author**, 2012; Yin, 2014). The researcher was a participant observer in many of the encounters where participants came into contact with the proponents of the proposed curriculum, met government authorities for redress, and during moments of sensitizing masses on the proposed curriculum. In order to obtain first-hand data, the researcher attended press conferences organised by the National Steering Committee for the Restoration of Indigenous Languages (NASCRIL) in the proposed curriculum. NASCRIL was a pressure group purposely set up to fight for the inclusion of indigenous languages in the proposed curriculum. The researcher moved with the Committee in many of its campaigns to sensitize stakeholders on the need to restore indigenous languages in the proposed curriculum. The researcher went on to observe numerous parliamentary caucus

proceedings where NASCRIL presented their case on indigenous languages. During the press conferences and caucus proceedings, the researcher interjected on some issues in order to sought clarifications for deeper understanding of the issue at hand.

Analysis of available documents on the proposed curriculum and the petition against scrapping of indigenous languages from the lower secondary school curriculum were the major documents analysed by the researcher. The documents became a basis upon which additional inquiry was carried out. Consequently, seven interviews were carried out with representatives of traditional leaders to assess their attitude in regard to the attempted scrapping of indigenous languages from the curriculum. Still, through interviews and conversations, views and opinions were obtained from publishers, authors, journalists, artists and local musicians. Views and opinions of Non- Governmental Organisations (NGOs) involved in adult literacy were also sought. A detailed focus group discussion with three members of NASCRIL was carried out which revealed significant strategies regarding the resistance against the scrapping of indigenous languages from the curriculum. Besides, seven focus group discussions were held with teachers in three of the five regions of the country. Four focus group discussions were carried out with teachers from urban schools whereas the rest were conducted in rural schools. Some teachers were purposively selected from schools where indigenous languages are taught whereas others were obtained from schools that do not the indigenous languages.

To obtain an in-depth insight into the views and opinions of stakeholders (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2014; Genzuk, 2003), the researcher employed semi-structured interviews with traditional leaders and unstructured interviews when conducting focus group discussions. A Conventional Content Analysis method was used to analyze documents concerning the proposed curriculum. The essence of employing this method was to organize the large quantities of text into much fewer content categories. The categories resulted into meaningful themes, and relationships among the themes emerged (Hsien & Shannon, 2005; Weber, 1990). The rest of the data were coded and organised into meaningful categories for easy interpretation. The categories were further analysed to establish relationships among categories, meanings and interpretation of the collected data (Creswell, 2009).

Findings and discussions

Huge volumes of data were realized from respondents, below is what transpired from the study.

Language, education and development

The architects of the proposal further suggest that the second and foreign languages are essential at the lower secondary level due to their importance in regional and international trade. It was therefore envisaged that teaching these languages would lead to increased participation of citizens in regional and international trade; which would in turn lead to national growth and development. There is no doubt that one's knowledge in regional or international language enhances his/her communication. But, communication alone does not necessarily lead to increased trade and development if other factors such as micro and macro-economic policies

are not streamlined. Wolff (2011) and Quane & Glanz (2010) lament about the mystery surrounding the use of the terms education and development; education and language; and development and language. According to him, the connection between development and language is largely ignored by philologist; the link between language and education is little understood; and the relationship between development and education is 'widely accepted on a priori grounds but with little understanding of the nature of the relationship'. Among the support documents submitted with the proposal is a list of individuals consulted during the formulation of the proposal. What is conspicuous about the list is the fact that participants were selected basing on institutional representation and not on one's expertise in curriculum and the specific selected learning areas, which might have compromised the quality of the reform.

The proposal further indicates that since local languages are taught at the primary education level, they should not be part of the curriculum at the lower secondary level but could be offered at the High School Certificate Level (that is, Senior Five to Six) to interested students. Though, the argument might sound viable in economic terms, it will not be educationally feasible for a learner at high school to offer an indigenous language due to discrepancies in the knowledge gap as a result of lack of continuity in the instruction process. Besides, the lower primary school (Primary One to Three) employs a thematic curriculum; where indigenous languages are employed as media of instruction, and not necessarily taught as subjects. The choice of a language of instruction in Africa is a political one and carries with it power connotations that draws a line between the elites and the masses (Alexander, 2003). If Africa is to empower the masses and foster social as well as economic development, then African political writers need to write in African languages; where the message could easily be received by the masses (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2005). Although, NCDC proposes the introduction of indigenous languages at the upper primary level (Primary Five to Seven), no instructional materials have been put in place to that effect, and teachers have not been trained to handle languages at that level. Ceasing to teach indigenous languages at a level where they had taken root and offered by a substantial number of students, and proposing to teach them at a lower level where teachers and instructional materials are lacking seem to contradict the general principals of education.

Similarly, the Non-Governmental Organisations dealing with adult learners conceived the attempted scrapping of indigenous languages from the curriculum as sending a negative signal to adult learners who had responded positively to literacy initiatives. One of the NGO staff working with adult learners laments:

If those languages are removed from secondary schools then our initiative to persuade adults to attend reading and writing lessons [in indigenous languages] will be no more. ...

Whatever is done in Kampala [Capital City] has a bearing on people's responses in this part of the country [Northern Uganda]. Already, a lot of damage has been done! The idea of removing these languages from school is all over the papers [Newspapers] and one wonders how we are to restore the trust of our adult learners. Our languages are being looked [at] as worthless. I hear that even children in schools (Primary Schools) have started classes in local languages.

On the contrary, a respondent from another NGO observed that teaching adults to read and write in English has always been her biggest hurdle. She hopes that the scrapping of indigenous languages from the lower secondary school curriculum would help adults realize the importance of English and put in extra effort when learning the language. But, other adult learners who were interviewed expressed fear in regard to by the adult educator was expressed by many stakeholders who regard to the scrapping of indigenous languages because they viewed these languages not only as a major media of instruction but also as a spring board to many development initiatives in both formal and informal sectors.

The socio-economic significance of indigenous languages

Data from interviews indicated that teachers were scared of losing their jobs. Close to three thousand teachers teach local languages at the lower secondary school level. The reform did not address the issue of the ‘would be victims’ if the proposed curriculum was rolled out. This would not only affect teachers but also other sectors such as the media, publishers and NGOs. As much as the majority of products from the teaching profession join teaching, some become news anchors and reporters; others work with adult learners; a few join the publishing industry; and the some diversify to other professions altogether. The media industry is next to the teaching profession in recruiting teachers who have offered indigenous languages at institutions of higher learning. Ironically, whereas teachers were scared of losing their jobs, media managers were concerned about what would happen to the pool of teachers of indigenous languages where they recruit from. One of the media practitioners who crossed from teaching to news anchoring observed:

I trained as a teacher of History and Luganda (one of the indigenous languages) and when I joined the media, I thought I was coming to a new profession altogether. I deceived myself – I am still teaching; through training new recruits, evaluating colleagues and (performing) other teaching related issues. I think it’s absurd to see that indigenous languages are not taken as a priority in our education system. Scrapping them from the curriculum will definitely affect our profession (Media industry) more than even the teaching profession. ... You see, products from Mass Communication departments can only execute their duties in English. This is because the language of instruction is English and the majority can not translate the acquired knowledge to local language. For instance, not many of my colleagues (who initially trained as journalists) can ably moderate and sustain a programme in Luganda despite the fact that their first language is Luganda.

The above assertion fulfills some of the tenets of the Practice-Based theory of professional education whereby teachers join the media not only to practice journalism but also to improve the professional wellbeing of media trainees. But, in a focus group discussion with three radio presenters, it was revealed that there are radio and television journalists who initially trained as journalists but moderating sports, business and education programmes in indigenous languages. According to these respondents, the choice of language does not necessarily lay with one’s training but with his/her fluency and communicative abilities.

The habit of employing graduates with qualifications in indigenous languages was intensified by the Uganda Communications Commission's directive to local television broadcasters to prioritize local content over foreign content in a move aimed at promoting peoples' identity and culture. Free to air television licenses were informed to ensure that an average of 70% of its programming during primetime (that is, 6PM – 11PM) consists of Uganda content (as noted by Musoke Ronald in *The Independent*, Uganda television stations risk being closed if they ignore local content directive – UCC on August 30th, 2013). The directive was in conformity with the Uganda Communications Commission Act (2013) which agitates for adequacy of local content in the electronic media. Media houses have fairly complied with this directive. As a result, hiring of employees with knowledge in indigenous languages was carried out; with the view of initiating programmes that would appeal to the local audience. The increasing attractiveness of opportunities in the media industry has attracted both English and indigenous language teachers to the profession. The recruited teachers are subjected to on-job training as one of the respondents indicated and some are sent abroad to enroll for media programmes. However, one of the producers at a leading electronic media expressed concern about the influx of non-trained media practitioners, teachers of indigenous languages inclusive. He attributed the falling standard in journalism to the employment of unqualified staff in mushrooming media houses. According to him, not all media houses subject their unqualified staff to training, 'but some of those (unqualified staff) who have been trained are performing better than those who initially trained as journalist'. As a result, the media entrepreneurs and managers castigated the attempted scrapping of indigenous languages observing that it would lead to the collapse of their industry.

The study also indicated that teachers of local languages had an attachment to the cultural heritage expressed through the language. Language and culture are intertwined, and the promotion of linguistic practices advances cultural norms that go hand in hand with the language. Using language is not necessarily a matter of uttering or writing messages that conform to rules of grammar, diction, spelling and rhetorical structures of standard language. It basically means 'expressing our humanity and collaborating with others in the construction of our common reality' (Lier & Corson, 1997, p. xi). The practical aspect of language enables culture to be perpetuated from one generation to another, hence a reflection of the tenets of the Practice-Based theory.

Subsequently, the traditionalists viewed the attempted scrapping of indigenous languages from the curriculum as an encroachment on the advancement of culture and development. They argued that language perpetuates culture and any move towards prohibiting its use tantamount to asphyxiate of language advancement. Respondents observed that failure to teach indigenous languages might lead to socio-linguistic erosion since much of the encyclopedia of traditional indigenous knowledge which is basically passed down orally from generation to generation is in danger of being lost forever (Tollefson, 2006; Tollefson, 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2001). Such a loss could be irreplaceable and irreparable. Hence, such a loss could signify not only the demise of traditional knowledge but also the loss of cultural diversity; resulting in undermining

the identity and spirituality of the speech community. Hence, the respondents viewed the attempted scrapping of indigenous languages as a threat to life-long learning; a concept that was gradually taking root in the country.

Sensitization of masses

In a bid to resist the scrapping of indigenous languages in the proposed lower secondary school curriculum, numerous strategies were laid by various stakeholders in a rather coordinated manner. A National Steering Committee for the Restoration of Indigenous Languages in the proposed curriculum (NASCRIL) was established. It consisted of a linguist and educationists from universities (3), authors and publishers (2), members from the NGOs (2), and representatives of the traditional and religious leaders (2). The terms and references of the Committee included the following: i) coordinating all activities geared towards inclusion of indigenous languages in the proposed curriculum; ii) reviewing a petition document written by one of the committee members;

iii) sensitizing masses and disseminating information related to the issue; iv) collecting signatures to support the petition and; v) serving the petition to the Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Uganda. In order to obtain authentic information on the removal of indigenous languages from the proposed curriculum, the NASCRIL Committee requested for an appointment with the top management of NCDC. One of the Committee members who attended the meeting revealed that their consultations with NCDC were to obtain the latter's stand on the issue at hand, and an attempt to persuade them to include indigenous languages in the proposed curriculum. However, NCDC was not willing to have the languages in the proposed curriculum though a promise was made to carry out wider consultations with the Ministry of Education and Sports and other stakeholders.

To intensify the campaign and solicit public sympathy, the NASCRIL Committee held a number of press conferences (five in number) in different parts of the Country. The media carried out a spirited fight against the attempted removal of indigenous languages from the curriculum as one of the respondents (an editor) in a government owned local newspaper revealed:

You know, I had to make sure that I include a story on this [campaign] whenever an opportunity arises. Removing these languages from the curriculum meant that we were automatically out of business. Our clients are those people who have offered these languages [indigenous languages] and are able to read our paper. We had to do our level best to make sure that they [indigenous languages] are part of the (proposed) curriculum.

Another journalist from the same newspaper revealed that one of their editors had instructed them to be cautious when writing articles related to the use of indigenous languages in the education system.

Amidst such revelations, the members embarked on a campaign to sensitise masses on the pending removal of indigenous languages from the proposed curriculum and the dangers

associated with such a move. The campaign commenced with a press conference attended by all the major media houses in the country. To garner support from professionals, the issue was tabled in the Uganda MultiLingual Education Network (MLEN) – a loose organisation of professionals who came together to promote mother tongue education. In this meeting, participants vowed to resist the scrapping of indigenous languages at all costs, in addition to sensitising the masses about the dangers of keeping indigenous languages out of the curriculum. In three weeks' time, the Committee had collected seventeen thousand nine hundred and forty two (17,942) signatures from all corners of the Country. This was made possible through a website established purposely for receiving signatures against the removal of indigenous languages from the curriculum. To intensify the campaign, the Committee members took the struggle to Parliament; where presentations were made in regard to the petition that had earlier on been written.

Taking the campaign to Parliament

The Committee met the Buganda Caucus; the biggest caucus in the Parliament of the Republic of Uganda with more than 80 members of parliament. The parliamentarians promised to table the issue on the floor of Parliament. But, it was during an interaction with the parliamentary committee on Education and Sports that a lot of impact was realised. The meeting was attended by NCDC top management. After listening to both sides, the parliamentary committee resolved that NCDC lacked a strong justification to support the removal of indigenous languages from the curriculum, and promised to table the issue on the floor of parliament for a wider debate. Conspicuous among the deliberations was the revelation by one of the parliamentary committee members belonging to the Security Committee (but invited to attend this meeting by the Chairperson – Education and Sports Committee). He expressed concern about the impasse the language issue had caused all over the country. He requested the NASCRIL Committee to meet the Parliamentary Committee on Security to find out the root cause of the excitement (in the media) 'which could become a security threat if not handled immediately and promptly'. By this time the indigenous language question had become a topical issue among the major media houses in the country. But as disclosed by one of the NASCRIL Committee members the meeting never took place due to the busy schedule of the Security Committee.

The disobedience technique

In a bid to exert pressure on NCDC and the Ministry of Education and Sports, the Committee spread out to key stakeholders such as authors, publishers and teachers of indigenous languages. Among the stakeholders who were contacted are the teachers of Luganda. The teachers of Luganda through their association – the Luganda Teachers' Association made a resolution on 1st May 2012 to boycott teaching and storm the Ministry Headquarters for an explanation if indigenous languages were not included in the proposed curriculum (Proceedings from the Annual Luganda Secondary School Teachers' Conference, 2012). After the conference, the Luganda teachers through their representatives presented the conference

resolutions to the Minister of Education and Sports. This practical expression by teachers of Luganda demonstrated the willingness of stakeholders to evoke state machinery in the fight against scrapping of indigenous languages. The teachers' determination relate well with Ball and Cohen's Practice-Based theory of professional education which hinges on building a community of practitioners who collectively seek human and social improvement. Besides, the teachers approached universities and other tertiary institutions where they trained from to garner support for their cause. This strategy was dictated by the fact that some indigenous languages, especially languages of wider communication like Luganda, are strongly entrenched in the university programmes and students offer Bachelors, Masters and Ph D programmes in these languages. In a focus group discussion one of the respondents observed that teachers had to bring on board lecturers and professors because their views and opinion would strengthen their cause.

Conclusion and implications

Exclusion of indigenous languages from the proposed curriculum was zealously resisted by numerous stakeholders. The Ministry of Education and Sports and the National Curriculum Development Centre yielded to pressure and included indigenous languages in the proposed curriculum. Indigenous languages were included among the languages that had to be taught at the lower secondary school level when the curriculum is rolled-out in 2017. Consequently, the campaign led to increased awareness of the status and role of indigenous languages among the citizens of Uganda. As a result, many media houses have since introduced programmes on indigenous cultures and languages in particular. According to a report from the Luganda Teachers Association 2014, there was an increase in the number of students offering the Luganda Teachers' Association Mock Examinations (LTA Mocks) by 27 percent, an increment partly attribute to the increased awareness of the population on the significance of indigenous languages. Hence, there has been quantitative improvement in the number of students offering indigenous languages as Ball and Cohen's theory suggest. Besides, the increased awareness of indigenous languages has led to various ethnic groups such as the Batwa, Bagwere and Basamia demand for the teaching of their languages in school as a measure to preserve and perpetuate their cultural heritage. Hence, the increased awareness of the sociolinguistic dynamics among the citizens has positioned indigenous languages among the important subjects in schools, media and other education institutions.

Recommendations

In order to avoid any future desecration of peoples' cultures and violation of their rights and freedoms, the researcher made the following recommendations based on the study findings. There is a need to implement the Government White Paper on Education of 1992 in its entirety. Secondary school education in Uganda is essentially regulated by the Education Act of 2008 and the Government White Paper on Education of 1992. The White paper stipulates the position and role of indigenous languages in secondary schools. It explicitly indicates that

students in secondary schools are required to offer an indigenous language in addition to English and the area language (Government White Paper on Education, 1992). The six area languages which are languages of wider communication are indigenous languages. Therefore, the Government White Paper on Education seems to promote indigenous languages despite the fact that its implementation has been slow. Any education reform in Uganda should essentially be in conformity with the Government White Paper on Education of 1992. Full implementation of the Government White Paper on Education is important if an occurrence similar to that of scrapping indigenous languages from the curriculum is to be avoided. Shortage of teachers of indigenous languages and scarcity of materials might be a stumbling block to realise the teaching of indigenous languages in schools. But, a phased approach is recommended; whereby indigenous languages should be included on the curriculum depending on their level of development in terms of mutual intelligibility, availability of orthography, presence of trained teachers and basic literature such as a dictionary and supplementary readers (NCDC, 2012b). These benchmarks should be regarded as minimum requirements for teaching an indigenous language.

Effective implementation of the above recommendation calls for a well laid out national language policy. The Ministry of Education and Sports needs to come up with a fully-fledged language policy that would not only enforce the teaching of indigenous languages but also preserve and perpetuate these languages. The guiding language policy enshrined in the Government White Paper on Education of 1992 could be a starting point towards the formulation of a national language policy. The national language policy is expected to spell out the position and status of English, Kiswahili, indigenous languages and the various foreign languages spoken in Uganda. This would probably iron-out the bad blood between Luganda and Kiswahili, and consequently respond to fears as to why the latter has failed to become a major medium of communication despite its official status.

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