

Embracing multilingualism in the classroom

Many learners around the world face educational challenges since their languages are not recognised in classrooms. **Dr Tracey Costley** and **Professor Hannah Gibson** from the **University of Essex** in the UK, **Professor Nancy C. Kula** from **Leiden University** in the Netherlands, **Professor Gastor Mapunda** from the **University of Dar es Salaam** in Tanzania and **Dr Colin Reilly** from the **University of Stirling** in the UK are part of a project team that aims to rethink language use in education to better support multilingual communities. A key goal of the team's work is to explore how students' multilingualism can be incorporated into teaching practices to enhance learning.



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Bringing the outside in: merging local language and literacy practices to enhance classroom learning and achievement

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Glossary

Language policy — the laws or rules governing the use of languages in a range of different contexts, including schools

Lingua franca — a common language used between speakers of different languages for communication

Linguistic repertoire — all the language skills that a person has and can make use of in their daily life

Medium of instruction (MOI) — the language used by the teacher to teach students in a classroom

Monolingual approach — an educational practice or policy that uses only one language for instruction

Multilingualism — the use of multiple languages by an individual or within a community daily life

In today's world, linguistic diversity is more prevalent than ever before. In some areas, like Europe, multilingualism is often perceived as being linked to people moving from one area to another. However, multilingualism is a longstanding and sustained

reality in much of the world. In many communities in Africa (and around the world), multiple languages have co-existed side-by-side for centuries. Globally, multilingualism, rather than monolingualism, is the norm.

Educational systems often fail to

reflect the reality of multilingualism, adhering instead to policies that promote the use of a single language in the classroom. This dissonance between policy and practice can create significant barriers to learning, particularly for students who do not know the language of instruction when they arrive at school. This is a pressing issue, as approximately 40% of the global population lacks access to education in a language they speak or understand.*

This is the challenge that Dr Tracey Costley, Professor Hannah Gibson (both from the University of Essex), Professor Nancy Kula (Leiden University), Professor Gastor Mapunda (the University of Dar es Salaam) and Dr Colin Reilly (the University of Stirling) sought to address through the project, ‘Bringing the outside in**’, and a follow-on project, ‘Maximising Impact***’. Their research focuses on bridging the gap between multilingual communities and monolingual classroom environments by integrating students’ linguistic backgrounds into their educational experiences.

Rethinking language use in education

“We started on this project to try and better understand the way in which the languages used in the wider community can be better harnessed to support learners’ experience of education in school, particularly in multilingual areas,” says Tracey. “The team conducted research in three African countries – Botswana, Zambia and Tanzania – where there are different linguistic realities and different language policies.” In these countries, multilingualism is a daily reality for many students. However, despite this linguistic diversity, official educational policies often mandate a monolingual approach, creating a disconnect between the languages spoken at home and those used in the classroom. The project team, which also includes Professor Mompoloki Bagwasi of the University of Botswana, and Dr Joseph Mwansa of the University of Zambia, saw a number of parallels but also some differences between the three countries. “Overall, we know that, in reality, often teachers and learners are using their whole linguistic repertoires to maximise communication and facilitate learning, even if this is not reflected in



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official policy,” explains Colin. “We wanted to show the ways in which multilingualism is beneficial and can be viewed as a resource, rather than as a problem to be overcome.”

Understanding multilingualism in Tanzania

“There are approximately 150 languages in Tanzania,” says Hannah. “In many communities across Tanzania, people use more than one language on a day-to-day basis and may interact with different people using different languages.” In urban areas, the linguistic repertoire is particularly diverse due to the presence of people from different regions and linguistic backgrounds. Within this multilingual environment, Swahili, the national language, also serves as a lingua franca. As a result, it is common for conversations to incorporate multiple languages, reflecting the multilingual nature of communication in Tanzania.

In the field of education, however, this multilingualism is not adequately mirrored in language policies. Swahili is the medium of instruction (MOI) at the primary school level in Tanzania, while English takes over in secondary and tertiary education. “This means that the majority of languages in the country are not reflected in the language policy, and there are no provisions for them in formal education,” explains Gastor.

Consequently, many children face the dual challenge of mastering the language of instruction while also trying to absorb new content.

The colonial legacy of monolingual policies

“The idea of a monolingual language policy can be considered a colonial inheritance,” says Nancy. “Swahili was used as the MOI during German and, later, British colonial rule in present-day Tanzania.” This practice laid the groundwork for the monolingual approach that continued post-independence. After gaining independence in 1961, Tanzania adopted Swahili as the MOI in primary schools and English for secondary and tertiary education. This strategy was not unique to Tanzania; many newly independent African nations implemented similar policies. Influenced by Eurocentric ideas of nation-building, these ‘one nation, one language’ policies aimed to unify diverse ethnic groups under a single national language to avoid perceived favouritism towards any particular community.

This monolingual policy has created significant challenges. “Even though the policy as a whole allows space for Swahili and English, it is essentially a monolingual policy which provides for only one language at any given time,” explains Colin. “This does not reflect people’s multilingual realities and imposes artificial boundaries between languages and rules on what language can be used where and when.” ➔

*www.unesco.org/en/languages-education **Bringing the outside in: Merging local language and literacy practices to enhance classroom learning and achievement
***Maximising Impact: Supporting multilingualism in practice: Resource co-creation in primary classrooms in Tanzania



Impact on learners

The reliance on monolingual approaches in Tanzanian education significantly impacts learners. Research around the world consistently shows that children learn best in a language they understand. However, many Tanzanian students enter school speaking their home languages and must first learn Swahili, the mandated MOI in primary schools, before they can engage with the curriculum. This dual challenge hampers their ability to acquire essential literacy and numeracy skills and can delay their overall educational progress.

“In some schools, children are even punished for using their home or community languages at school,” says Gastor. “This has a clearly negative impact on children’s experience of education and can contribute to poor attendance and early drop-out. Our research participants suggest that a Swahili-only policy is not an effective approach for all learners.”

Benefits of embracing multilingualism

To understand the impact of multilingualism on education, the team conducted extensive fieldwork in Tanzania, visiting ten schools in the Ruvuma and Tabora regions. “As some participants suggest, embracing multilingualism will give learners the opportunity to transition smoothly from their home experiences to the new school experience,” says Tracey. “It will also make teaching and learning more effective because learners will understand more easily.”

To begin embracing multilingualism in the classroom, a key initial step is to ensure that children are not punished or stigmatised for using languages they are comfortable and familiar with. “In practical terms, there are resources that have been developed and trialled which actively encourage pupils to bring their multilingual repertoires into the learning environment,” says Colin. For instance, teachers can use multilingual resources, including glossaries, word walls and group activities that encourage the use of various languages. These strategies help celebrate

linguistic diversity and demonstrate the value of each student’s linguistic background by showing learners how much they do know, rather than emphasising gaps.

Challenges faced by teachers

Teachers in Tanzania encounter significant challenges in adhering to the monolingual Swahili-only policy in the classroom. Despite the pressure to follow the school syllabus and meet curriculum milestones, many teachers find that a strictly monolingual approach does not meet the needs of all students. Consequently, while they may strive to follow the policy, many teachers also use other languages to facilitate understanding and learning.

In Tanzania, teachers are deployed through a centralised system, which often results in them being sent to regions where they do not speak the local language. “Without further training on how to work with and navigate multilingual classrooms, it is often difficult for teachers to know what to do to help learners,” explains Gastor. “Some ask other students in the class to translate or explain ideas, while others try to learn some words of the local language. But of course, this means that learners’ experiences vary.”

Teachers’ efforts to use multilingual approaches can sometimes be viewed negatively, as there is a perception that sticking strictly to Swahili or English is more desirable for academic progress. Without proper training and support in managing multilingual classrooms, teachers may often be unable to provide inclusive and effective education for all students, highlighting the urgent need for policy reforms and professional development programmes that embrace multilingualism.

Global parallels

The challenges and dynamics of multilingual education in Tanzania are not unique and have parallels in various contexts around the world. In many countries, schools are increasingly multilingual, and there are similar challenges faced by teachers and students, who are operating in educational systems that are not designed to

embrace multilingualism and, instead, promote a monolingual space for teaching and learning. This is also true if we think about the use of different varieties of a language. In England, for example, OFSTED’s promotion of Standard English does not always reflect the language repertoires of all students, or view their repertoires as a resource to be celebrated, instead of a problem to be fixed. In other contexts, multilingual education might mean dividing the school day between different languages or having different subjects taught in different languages. “We support a different approach which does not try to impose strict rules or boundaries between languages and places or times for language use,” says Tracey. “We want to facilitate truly multilingual approaches that allow teachers and learners to reflect their whole selves at whatever point and however they wish.”

Support and advice for teachers

“Teachers should be given the skills they need to feel confident teaching in multilingual classrooms, especially when they might not know the languages children speak,” explains Nancy. “Awareness of multilingualism needs to be a part of teacher training, especially in places like Tanzania, where multilingualism is widespread.”

Teachers should also be encouraged to view all languages as valuable resources, rather than obstacles. “It is understandable that teachers may, at times, be uncomfortable embracing a multilingual approach in the classroom, particularly if they do not know the same languages as their students,” says Hannah. “However, teachers who were involved in our research often emphasised that getting over this initial discomfort and unease allowed them to create classroom spaces that were centred around their students and allowed the students to be themselves in the classroom. Ultimately, this leads to a more rewarding teaching and learning experience for all.”

Next steps

The team’s ongoing efforts extend beyond research; they are actively engaged in applying their findings to tangible educational initiatives. “We have been running workshops with teachers,” says Hannah. “These build on the research we have done, but we are keen to think about the next steps and what some of the practical implications of our research might be.” By promoting discussions on multilingualism, these workshops empower educators to implement effective approaches in their classrooms by addressing the diverse linguistic needs of students and facilitate a more inclusive learning environment. Through collaboration and innovation, the team strives to pave the way for transformative changes in education that embrace and celebrate linguistic diversity.

Meet *the team*



Tracey

I have been involved in English language teaching for many years and have become increasingly interested in the politics of curriculum and issues of social justice. It is exciting to explore new ways of approaching what we do in classrooms and how we can make these more equitable spaces for everyone involved.

I would like to see more inclusion of students' and teachers' full linguistic resources in classrooms, and more awareness of how these resources can be used for learning. I would also like to see more discussion of multilingual teacher training.



Hannah

I really enjoyed that the research itself and some of our interactions as a team have been multilingual. It is often the case that people do research on multilingualism, but the research is conducting monolingually. I was glad to see we managed to do something a little different!

It would be great if we could see a shift towards multilingualism being actively encouraged in education, both in Tanzania and worldwide. It is an incredible skill and one that should be harnessed and supported, rather than ignored or actively discouraged!



Nancy

Language is something everyone has an opinion about. Once you consider the social and educational aspect of language, it becomes political and even more interesting, leading you to explore equality and social justice.

curiosity, and I would like our research to help them express themselves freely in any language that they wish. Removing any hindrance based on language from classrooms would help to create the free and stimulating learning environments we see in playgrounds.



Gastor

My passion for this research stems from my experience of how interactive lessons can be. We have always wondered how classes are held if learners (and sometimes teachers) cannot communicate well in the language of the classroom. In fact, national examinations results show an immense disparity in performance between students

from urban and rural areas.

The noise that we are making about this problem is not going unnoticed. Through our publications and interaction with educators, people are beginning to appreciate what we are doing and attitudes towards multilingualism are changing.



Colin

For me, the highlight of this project is collaboration with my wonderful colleagues! This was a project with a fairly large collaborative team, with colleagues based in different countries, at different universities, working together to address these issues. It was also wonderful to find out about, and meet some of, the teachers who are

doing fantastic, innovative things in their classrooms to embrace multilingualism.

I would like to see children be able to go to school and bring their whole selves, and their whole linguistic repertoires with them, and to feel comfortable and valued in doing so.