

# Understanding ‘understanding’: Towards supporting understanding in the classroom through the understanding of curricula studies – an upcoming project

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## Introduction

It may seem common-sensical that learning best takes place through a language that children are familiar with and understand. Yet, most learners in post-colonial contexts are taught in a European language, often English, which is more or less familiar to them. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), this is the norm. According to The World Bank (2021, p.9), 80% of all learners in SSA are not being taught in the language they speak and understand best, something which contributes to the high levels of *learning poverty*<sup>1</sup> in the region. The present article will describe a project which will attempt to breach this language gap. The project involves partners from the University of Seychelles; University of Dodoma, Tanzania; University of Zanzibar; and Bristol University, England; and is funded by the Swedish Research Council. It will commence in autumn 2023.

Quality and inclusive basic education for all is the main target within the Education Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). It also directly contributes to other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including poverty elimination (SDG1), gender equality (SDG5), sustainable economic growth and decent work (SDG8), and reduced inequality (SDG10). International and national agencies have long recognized this fact. Since 2000, and up until the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion of children attending primary school globally has dramatically increased and the basic education cycle considered necessary for all children has been extended to include lower secondary education. However, The World Bank (2021, pp.8-9) points to ‘shockingly low learning outcomes’ in their recent policy approach paper on language of instruction policies. The paper reports that 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries, and a massive 87 percent in sub-Saharan Africa are experiencing learning poverty, meaning they are unable to read with understanding by the age of ten. One of the main reasons for this are unrealistic language-of-instruction policies that expect children and young people to learn in an unfamiliar language (ibid.). In SSA alone, 80% of learners are taught in a language, often an ex-colonial European language, that they do not, or only partially, understand. Whilst the problem has long been recognized by researchers (e.g., Trudell, 2016; Simpson 2019; The

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<sup>1</sup> A combined measure of children who read below the minimum proficiency level at the end of primary education and the share of children who are out-of-school (The World Bank, 2019).

World Bank, 2021), very little research has been directed at finding feasible pathways for policy to address the problem. This research is directly concerned with identifying the changes that education systems can make to language policy and practices that will improve learning for all boys and girls.

The consequences of excluding learners' familiar languages from learning processes and outcomes are well-documented. Children who do not understand what is being said in the classroom are effectively silenced, making learner-centred pedagogy based on interactive knowledge construction and exploratory talk difficult (e.g., Clegg, 2019). Textbooks, designed for readers with native-like fluency, lie unused because learners cannot read them. Examinations fail to give an indication of learners' understanding of the subject matter they cannot communicate in an unfamiliar language (ibid.). Inevitably this leads to high drop-out rates and failures, especially amongst already vulnerable groups (Milligan et al., 2020).

Language policies and practices in education also have the effect of making education irrelevant to learners and decrease their opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, hence breaking the link between SDG4 and SDG8 as well as the six environment-related SDGs (Barrett and Bainton, 2016). This is because the exclusion of local languages invalidates learners' prior 'common-sense' knowledge acquired outside of school or in early years education, where the use of the mother tongue is more widespread. Being unable to make connections to what they already know impedes the learning of new knowledge and also risks alienating schools from local communities and the support of parents (Brock-Utne, 2017; Trudell, 2016). However, more positively, classroom research suggests that many teachers across sub-Saharan Africa have developed multilingual strategies to support second language learners (Msimanga, 2021).

## Project overview

This paper aims to describe future research that has just been granted funding by the Swedish Research Council to bridge the gap between language policies on the intended/stated (textual) level versus the implemented praxis level in the classroom. A key question in the upcoming project is how/whether steering documents and curricula in various L2 MoI transition systems in SSA acknowledge the realities and challenges involved in learning and teaching through a second language. Language ideologies that guide policies on all levels are also of central interest. Tasks include the development of a systematic analytical framework that specifically targets language praxis aspects (or lack thereof) at different policy levels. We envisage a model which can be adapted for different transition contexts in SSA. With this in mind, the research approaches four different L2 MoI transition systems: 1. Immersion (i.e. L2 MoI from start – Seychelles); early transition (transition to L2 MoI after Primary 2 – Seychelles); mid-transition (transition to L2 MoI

in Primary 5 – Zanzibar); and late transition (transition to L2 MoI in secondary school – Tanzania mainland).

In Phase 1 of the upcoming research, we will analyse steering documents from the four contexts with special focus on ‘language issues’. We also plan to interview policy makers. Phase 2 consists of a consequence analysis of how language-in-education policy directives and recommendations translate into practice in the field. Queries include language ideological aspects and how these may support/hinder more inclusive language policies. Specific research questions in the funded research include but are not limited to:

*Phase 1: Contexts of policy production and interpretation*

- a) What is the existing research evidence on how language ideologies and language-in-education policy influence teaching and learning processes and outcomes?
- b) What assumptions regarding learners’ language proficiency, language learning, and valued language practices are embedded in policy-steering documents, including curriculum frameworks?
- c) What provision, if any, does education policy make for teacher education, management and resourcing of L2 MoI?
- d) How do subject syllabi, learning resources, and assessment address the needs of second language learners?
- e) To what extent do policy actors recognize the learning needs of second language learners?

*Phase 2: Questions related to how policy directives translate into practice in the field*

- a) How are teachers’ language beliefs and practices influenced by policy and its interpretation?
- b) How is language policy experienced by learners?
- c) To what extent are subject learning outcomes for different groups of learners (boys/girls, higher/lower SES, rural/urban, ethnolinguistic identity), especially those that are relevant to sustainable development, facilitated or limited by language policy?

Outcomes from this project will give policy makers and other interested parties a better understanding of the realities of pedagogy and language in the region. Such understanding is a prerequisite for serious discussions and initiatives to implement constructive, quality language-policy changes. By analysing the (mis)alignment between policies and practices, the project will identify the changes in policies and support for teachers that would enable education systems to shift to effective multilingual education (see Section 2).

In particular, we will be able to draw out recommendations regarding how and at what stage in the basic education cycle transition in language of instruction can be undertaken

at scale. The project will also develop tools and methods for analysing language-in-education policies and their implementation. These will be adapted for use by policy makers, e.g., curriculum designers, allowing them to measure the internal consistency of curriculum documents (e.g., progression in language-learning objectives and their match to language demand across the curriculum) and their responsiveness to learners' language proficiencies (e.g., how well syllabi, textbooks and other learning resources and assessment instruments are adapted to the language proficiency of learners). Recommendations will provide policy makers in the African partners' countries, and elsewhere, with a 'road map' for transitioning from subtractive to additive multilingual approaches. Implications for theory, policy and research internationally will emerge from a comparison of findings across the four transition contexts. We will also elucidate the role of language in making basic education relevant to the learners' lived experiences, and to local, national and contemporary contexts and, hence, optimizing its potential to contribute to sustainable development.

## Background and previous research

There is substantial evidence of the negative consequences of L2 MoI systems in sub-Saharan Africa and international researchers and advocacy organizations have long argued, partly in vain, for the use of the mother tongue or a familiar language (L1s) as the medium of instruction in education (Trudell 2016; Simpson 2019; The World Bank, 2021). There are several explanations that have been offered for the persistence of monolingual L2 MoI in SSA. Looking back, Spolsky (2018) argues that many of the former colonies in Africa continued the use of European MoI partly for convenience and partly to preserve the power and advantages of the small elite who have developed mastery in the L2s (p.330). More recently, motivational economic factors, such as educating their citizens for internationalization, commerce, and current globalization trends, seem to be major aspects influencing decisions favouring the persistence of European MoIs (Kamwangamalu, 2018).

Systematic studies exploring language-in-education policies in the region at different levels (management, ideological and practice levels) are relatively rare. There are some notable exceptions, however, which all indicate that language ideologies, particularly negative attitudes held by teachers and parents towards the role of L1s in the classroom, hinder the implementation of policies that give local languages a more prominent role in the learning process (Nakayiza, 2013; Mokibelo, 2014; Ashikuti, 2019; Zelime, 2022). In accordance with Coetzee-Van Rooy (2018), we want to make a strong case for the idea that a deeper understanding of the contextual sociolinguistic situation (urban vs rural, for example) and language ideology aspects are essential in the analysis of policies.

The consequence of policies such as those discussed above is that most educational systems in SSA have so-called *subtractive bilingual* systems of instruction. In such systems, the local

languages are more or less excluded from the classroom context (at least formally) and replaced by a second language of learning and teaching – usually a former European colonial language. The stages of the educational cycle at which this happens vary from country to country. For the purpose of this research, we identify four different transition models: immersion, early transition, mid-transition and late transition (see above).

Baker (2011, p.72) describes subtractive bilingualism as a process whereby there is often pressure to demote the L1 in favour of the L2. He argues that this can lead to negative cognitive effects, but also social effects including ‘less positive self-concept, loss of cultural or ethnic identity, with possible alienation and marginalization’. Similarly, Erling et al. (2017) point to the negative effects of subtractive bilingual education, where the primary learners are often moved out of their L1 and into English as quickly as possible, ‘often with little scaffolding and short transition periods’ (p.22). Further, as pointed out by the same authors, the model ‘does not validate and support the development of the local language in education, potentially leading to the loss of or limited capacity of this language’ (p.22). Finally, as discussed above, the exclusion of local languages from education, directly or indirectly, lead to the exclusion of the local context from the learning process (Zelime & Deutschmann, 2019; Trudell, 2016).

An alternative model to subtractive bilingualism is so-called *additive multilingual education* (MLE). Here two (or more) languages are used to deliver curricular subject content in parallel; i.e. the introduction of a L2 MoI does not exclude the L1 from teaching and learning (May, 2017). Of particular interest to this project is *flexible MLE*, which refers to additive multilingual models that validate and build on all the learners’ actual linguistic resources, including non-standard language forms and varieties (Erling et al., 2017, pp.22-23). In practice, such models, arguably build on ideas of ‘translanguaging as pedagogy’ (Bonacina-Pugh, et al., 2021, p.447). This includes *fluid languaging*, which draws on all the semiotic resources available in the classroom indiscriminately (c.f. Banda, 2018); and *fixed language* approaches, where the functions of the languages in the classroom are defined and more carefully planned. Flexible MLE, as described above, is consistent with Heugh and Stroud’s (2020) concept of functional multilingualism and allows for ‘multi-directional communication through porous linguistic borders’ while still recognizing the importance of ‘developing expertise in writing at an academic level in at least one [...] standard written language[s]’ (Heugh et al., 2017, p.205).

One important task of Phase 2 of the present project involves capturing what is going on in terms of informal additive MLE under the present subtractive systems, i.e. identifying and describing examples of additive MLE in the classrooms. To date, voices from the field, i.e. teachers and school leaders in SSA, have largely been missing in the MLE knowledge construction, despite evidence that teachers across the sub-continent have been improvising effective multilingual practices for decades (Msimanga, 2021).

### *Significance and scientific novelty*

While various language supportive measures based on translanguaging practices (Garcia et al., 2017) have been shown to be successful in increasing school achievements in multilingual learning contexts in Europe and the US (e.g., Duarte, 2020; Heuzeroth & Budke, 2020), and to some extent in South Africa (e.g., McKinney & Tyler, 2019; Banda, 2018), translanguaging approaches have been criticized regarding their application in SSA. Heugh and Stroud (2020), for example, caution that translanguaging frameworks' rejection of the compartmentalized view of languages risks neglecting the linguistic realities in many parts of SSA and the language practices students need to master in order to 'access to the standardised variety of written and spoken languages that open doors to higher education and high-level employment opportunities' (p.219). This debate, as well as language ideological factors discussed above, underscore the importance of evaluating translanguaging, and other theoretical frameworks, taking the specificities of SSA contexts into account. This project moves this research forward.

Further, taken as a whole, research from SSA on how to support learning of content through a second language in different types of transition systems is largely missing. There are some notable exceptions, and the development of so-called *Language Supportive Pedagogy* (LSP) is currently yielding promising results (see Erling et al., 2021; Msimanga & Essien, 2021). LSP was developed in Tanzania and Rwanda as a practice-based initiative to strengthen teaching and learning in contexts where a change from L2 medium of instruction policies seemed unlikely. LSP thereby recognizes the formal role of European L2s in the classroom and focuses on developing and refining 'a range of strategies to amplify meanings' (Clegg & Milligan, 2021, p.206). This includes supporting the learning of content through an additional familiar/first language (Erling et al., 2021). LSP has, however, largely been developed for mid- and late transition contexts, and has focused primarily on how to support learning in the natural sciences. Less is known on how to support children in immersion and earlier transition systems, and the specific needs for support in other subjects than the sciences. All of these aspects are covered by areas of enquiry in the current project. Further, we believe informal multilingual practices from the field need to be documented and systematically described, and this is also one of the ambitions of the project.

Short term impacts of the project will directly benefit teachers and learners in the investigated contexts, i.e. various parts of mainland Tanzania, Zanzibar and Seychelles. By highlighting challenges and solutions that exist under the current systems, we believe we can arm local policy makers and practitioners with the knowledge needed to motivate micro changes that improve the everyday classroom situations for thousands of children. Long term, this type of research contributes to generate the evidence national and regional governments need in order to initiate national scale initiatives for more inclusive language-of-instruction policies and practice in the region.

### *Preliminary and previous results*

The members of the project group have accumulated wide-ranging knowledge on language education policies and/or practices. Barrett and Sane, for example have conducted extensive work in Tanzania under two projects focusing on language supportive pedagogy (LSP) and the integration of LSP into teacher training in the region (see Barrett et al., 2021; Barrett, 2017; Rubagumya et al., 2021). Work included the adaptation of learning materials and textbooks for LSP. Pilot studies conducted under these projects have armed us with valuable insights and contacts that will help us make informed choices under the present project. For example, we have found alarming mismatches between the language demand of the science curriculum and the English language proficiency of students in Tanzania.

Many of the methods developed under the LSP projects are also directly applicable to the present study, for example tools for how to compare and match subject and English curriculum targets. Methods include analysis of language accessibility of language and subject textbooks and the support they provide for language learning. Similar methods have been used to analyse readability of National Examinations taken at the end of Form 2 in Tanzania. Other tools developed include vocabulary tests used to evaluate learners' readiness to meet the language demands of science subjects. Such analytical tools can be directly applied to the current research context and also adapted for different subjects and transition levels.

Previous research in Tanzania, Zanzibar and Seychelles has also given us good insights into sites that represent a range of sociolinguistic and socioeconomic contexts and different patterns of gender interaction. For example, we know that it cannot be assumed that approaches in an urban area in Tanzania, where most learners have Kiswahili as their mother tongue, are similar to those employed in a rural area where learners use a non-Bantu community or ethnic language. There is also some evidence from Tanzania and Zanzibar to suggest that where girls are educationally disadvantaged, a transition in language of instruction can disadvantage them further (Barret, 2017). Studies from the Seychelles context suggest opposite gender patterns, with boys being particularly disadvantaged (see Deutschmann & Zelime, 2015).

Previous curriculum studies conducted in Seychelles and elsewhere (see Zelime 2022; Zelime & Deutschmann, 2016; Ivanov et al., 2015) have given us insights into the analysis of curriculum documents and steering documents at different levels. Results suggest that there are serious mismatches between the role of the L1 expressed in the overall language policy frameworks and the role of the same in the more praxis-oriented curricula documents, where the L1 tends to be undermined. Deutschmann and Zelime have also conducted studies investigating teachers' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and classroom practice related to language-of-instruction issues. Findings here suggest that teachers are generally negative towards the use of the L1 in the classroom but also that this may be a result of contradictory, or lack of clear directives from policy documents in relation to this question (Zelime & Deutschmann, 2018). Finally, the work of Trudell covers a plethora of

policy studies in the region and Ismail’s work provides excellent insights into various classroom practices in Zanzibar, including the use of digital technology to enhance learning.

**Project description**

The project is organised in two distinct phases, investigating four distinct contexts (see Figures 1 and 2 below). Details are described further below.

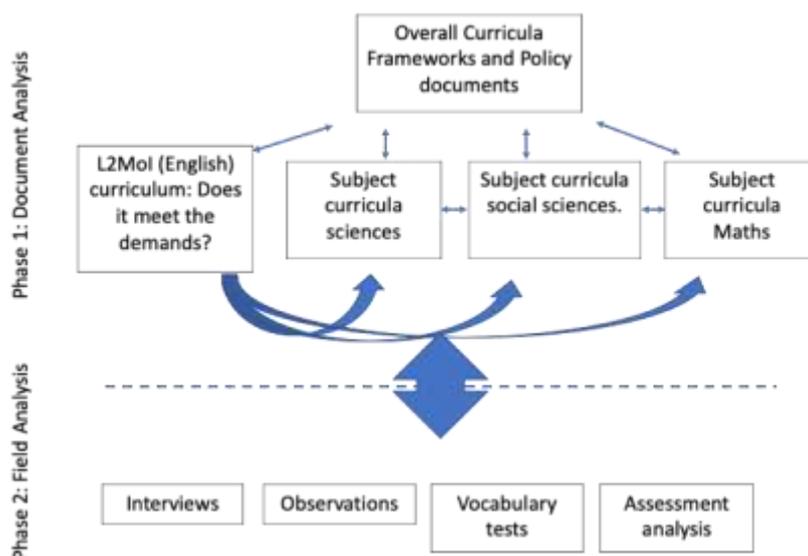


Figure 1: Phase 1 and 2 - methods and analysis

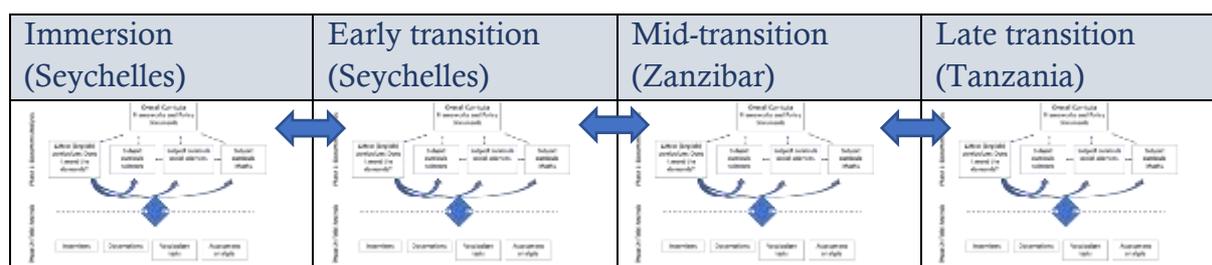


Figure 2: Interrelationship between the four contexts

**Theory and method**

Theoretically our approach is guided by social constructivist learning perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978); i.e. a general belief that learning takes place in social interaction with others, and that language is an essential part of this process. Further, in accordance with Halliday (2004), we recognize three ways of thinking about the relationship between learning and language: learning *a* language, learning *through* language, and learning *about* language. All these three aspects form part of our analytical framework.

In Phase 1, the study is underpinned by a conceptualization of policy from critical policy studies (e.g., Ball, 1994), which define policy expansively to extend beyond policy documents and texts to encompass policy discourse, processes, actions and outcomes (Taylor et al., 1997). Hence, the research is concerned with context of text production, the text itself, processes of implementation and their outcomes. These ‘policy contexts’ call for different methods of data collection and analysis.

Methodologically, we will thus adopt a mixed-methods approach which allows for various purposes, but also triangulation ‘thereby eliminating the bias inherent in the use of a single method’ (Riazi & Candlin, 2014, p.144). Some of the planned methodological approaches related to the research questions in the two phases are summarized below:

***Phase 1: Contexts of policy production and interpretation. Methods – documentary analysis and elite interviews. Methods for each of the research questions 1a-2c are listed below:***

- ◆ **1a) Systematic literature review.**
- ◆ **1b) Critical discourse analysis** using Fairclough’s (2003) approach. This analysis includes intertextual analysis to identify the influence of international debates and international agencies such as the World Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO. We also plan interviews with policy actors.
- ◆ **1c) Systematic review** of policy documents.
- ◆ **1d) Systematic review** of curriculum documents, textbooks and national examination papers for selected subjects (e.g., one humanities, one social studies and one science subject) that compare proficiency expectations with language learning objectives of the English curriculum and Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). For textbook analysis tools, see Barrett et al. (2014).
- ◆ **1e) Elite interviews** with policy actors, such as senior officers from the Ministry of Education, INGO staff.

***Phase 2: Contexts of practice and outcomes. Methods – field research***

- ◆ **2a) Subject teacher case studies** that use a mix of qualitative data-collection methods including: *narrative interviews* focused on language learning experiences in higher education and professional training; *lesson observations*, followed by *interviews* focused on classroom practices; *interviews* focused on lesson planning; *group discussions* between subject and language teachers; *interviews* with education professionals, who actively influence teachers’ practice, including school inspectors/quality assurers and teacher educators. Lesson observations will be attentive to monolingual and multilingual languages practices, movement between languages and registers and strategies that teachers use to integrate language and subject learning (adaptation of tools developed for the ELSATS project).
- ◆ **2b) Short focus group** with learners immediately following the observed lesson to capture their classroom experience. Longer *activity-based, focused discussions* on

experiences of transition in the language of instruction. *Interviews* with recent school graduates, who have and haven't continued with further education training and with out-of-school youth.

- ◆ **2c) Vocabulary assessments.** Previous research demonstrates that knowledge of vocabulary is a reliable indicator of conceptual understanding and language proficiency (Yu, 2010). These can be readily administered to large numbers of learners and analysed to identify school effects (Barrett et al., 2014). When used together with school questionnaires and Multilevel Modelling, school effects can be measured. When used alongside short biodata questionnaires, student effects can be measured. In Seychelles, and possibly Zanzibar, we may be able to conduct secondary analysis of national assessment data for the end of primary cycle examinations, but this depends on access, which is harder to negotiate in Tanzania mainland. We will conduct analysis of short written outputs in L1 and L2 using systematic functional grammarian methods, following Zelime and Deutschmann (2019). We will also compare outcomes in assessment sets in L1 and L2, with and without bilingual features – as demonstrated by research on examination performance in Zanzibar (Rea-Dickins & Yu, 2013).

## Conclusion

One essential gap in our knowledge of L2 MoI contexts in SSA is a better understanding of the interrelationship between the structural and theoretical aspects of MLE and current MoI policies (aspects we know well) with the impact of the same on the micro level in the field. For example, how can MLE be used to help teachers enable learners to access and demonstrate curriculum knowledge when their proficiency in English is limited. It is where the practical meets the theoretical that we believe the most informed and robust ideas for change will take form, and to provide an understanding of these aspects is central to the forthcoming project.

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