

EVALUATION OF EDUCATION—ON WHOSE TERMS?

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The interrelationship between language and culture

by Birgit Brock-Utne¹

Abstract: This paper examines the interrelationship between language and culture. Language is more than culture and culture is more than language. The paper discusses especially the relationship between the language used for schooling and the content of the learning material and of school culture itself. Often textbooks for children in developing countries are written and published abroad in a foreign language and are adopted for use without any modification. Sometimes one may find learning material in local languages which is just direct translations of curriculum material made abroad, normally in ex-colonizing countries and with content from a foreign culture. The paper also discusses the model whereby the content of curriculum material is local but the language used is the ex-colonial language. There are e.g. also well-known authors who write from Africa and describing African culture but in the ex-colonial languages. The best model would be to have learning content and texts taken from the local culture written in the local language. This model is, however, seldom found.

Introduction

This paper is still a paper in the making. The interrelationship between language and culture puzzles me. Some authors claim that language *is* culture. Though cultures partly exist through language, culture is more than language. Language is also more than culture. We who are working in another culture, particularly in an African culture, need to reflect on the interrelationship between language and culture. We may learn the language of the people we deal with. This will help us to grasp more of their culture, but it is not synonymous with knowing the culture. If we teach in any secondary school or institution of higher learning in Africa, we shall have to use a foreign language coming out of a different culture as a teaching tool.

¹ Institute for Educational Research. P.B.1092 Blindern.
University of Oslo, 0317 Oslo. Norway
birgit.brock-utne@ped.uio.no or birgitbuno@yahoo.no

Language as “culture expressing itself in sound”

Folklorist Crats Williams defines language as "culture expressing itself in sound" (quoted in Ovando 1990:341). It gives individuals and groups their identity. There is a powerful connection between language and sociocultural identity. The language you learnt your first words in, the language your mother and father talked to you, the language which was used in your nearest surroundings and the language you use with your closest family and friends will always be a part of your identity as a person. When the language one uses in daily communication is denigrated, for instance not deemed fit as a language of instruction at higher levels of schooling, the child may feel that a part of her/himself is also being denigrated.²

When you learn a new language, you also learn much about a new culture. That can be an enriching experience provided that experience does not teach you to look down on your own mother tongue and thus at part of your own identity (Gaarder 1972, Brock-Utne 1994). The concepts which have been developed in a language tell us much about the culture in which a particular language is used. It is difficult to talk about the different types of snow in English. The Norwegian language has many more words for different types of snow. The language used by the Eskimos has even more words for snow than the Norwegian language has. In the areas in the north the various conditions of the snow are important. Some conditions are good for skiing, others not, some are good for building an igloo or snow-hut, others not. We need to differentiate between the different types of snow. But the Norwegian language, like English, has only one word for banana. In Kiswahili there are about twenty words for different types of bananas. In some of the other Tanzanian languages like Kichagga there are even more word for different types of bananas. When a language dies, concepts belonging to that culture die with it. The socio-linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) claims that there is a causal interrelationship between linguistic diversity and bio-diversity.

² When it comes to linguistic minority children in Norwegian schools Astri Heen Wold (1992:247) notes: You do not accept a child when you convey a message saying that one of the central characteristics of the child, her or his language, is of no worth. When the Norwegian school enables the existence and further development of the minority child's vernacular it signals the following: Your language is important and precious and so are you. (my translation)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) claims that during colonial times the African child learnt to associate his own language with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence or downright stupidity. Because any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded through prizes³, and through the prospects of climbing up the educational ladder, knowledge of English came to be associated with intelligence and prospects for success.

In the *World Declaration on Education for All* education through the mother tongue is mentioned just once and in the following sentence: "Literacy in the mother tongue strengthens cultural identity and heritage." (WDEFA 1990: Article 5)

In this sentence it looks like the main reason why children should learn to read their mother tongue is to maintain culture.

Language is more than culture

Enabling children to use their mother tongue to obtain literacy does not only have to do with retaining cultural identity. It also has to do with facilitating the process of learning to read and write. Language is more than culture. And culture is also more than language. Many African educationists have for many years been concerned about the fact that using African languages in education makes children learn better. In 1980 Pai Obanya, who was then the Director of the UNESCO office in West-Africa, BREDA, in Senegal noted that:

It has always been felt by African educationists that the African child's major learning problem is linguistic. Instruction is given in a language that is not normally used in his immediate environment, a language which neither the learner nor the teacher understands and uses well enough. (Obanya 1980: 88)

Obanya is here not primarily using the cultural argument as an argument for retaining the African languages. He is using an educational argument. He is concerned with facilitating learning, with communication between teacher and pupils. If the African child's major learning problem is linguistic, and I tend to agree with Obanya that it is, then all the attention of African policy-makers and aid from Western donors should be devoted to a strengthening of the African languages as languages of instruction,

³ In Tanzania the English language support project used more luring incentives like flying to the prize centre and back home not only the successful students but also their teachers and the Head of the school. There was no such incentive for being an outstanding student of Kiswahili.

especially in basic education. The concept "education for all" becomes a completely empty concept if the linguistic environment of the basic learners is not taken into account.

In 1982 the Ministers of Education in Africa met in Harare in Zimbabwe to discuss the use of African languages as languages of education. They stressed that:

there is an urgent and pressing need for the use of African languages as languages of education. The urgency arises when one considers the total commitment of the states to development. Development in this respect consists of the development of national unity; cultural development; and economic and social development. Cultural development is basic to the other two....Language is a living instrument of culture, so that, from this point of view, language development is paramount. But language is also an instrument of communication, in fact the only complete and the most important instrument as such. Language usage therefore is of paramount importance also for social and economic development (ED-82: III).

As we see here the Ministers are not only concerned about retaining African languages in order to preserve culture but they are also using educational arguments. Language is more than culture.

When the most important educational question is overlooked

There is little doubt that the systematic but frequently ignored differences between the language and culture of the school and the language and culture of the learner's community have often resulted in educational programmes with only marginal success at teaching anything except self-depreciation (Okonkwo, 1983: 377).

The Nigerian socio-linguist Okonkwo (1983) is concerned about the fact that both the language and the culture of the school are foreign to the African child. He is concerned with the simultaneous learnings going on in such a class-room where the pupils do not understand what the teacher is trying to teach them. One always learns something in an educational situation but it may not be what the teacher had planned as intended learning outcomes. In a class-room where children do not understand what the teacher is saying they learn that they are stupid, that school learning is nothing for them, that they should stop dreaming of higher education but be satisfied with their place in life. The "education for all" strategy formulated at the important educational conference in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 was meant to target the poor

(Brock-Utne 2000, Brock-Utne 2005a, Brock-Utne 2005b). In an article on education for all: policy lessons from high-achieving countries Santosh Mehrotra (1998:479) draws our attention to what he sees as the most important characteristic of those developing countries that really target the poor and have the highest percentage of the population with a completed basic education:

The experience of the high-achievers has been unequivocal: the mother tongue was used as the medium of instruction at the primary level in all cases

Yet in the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar there was, according to Dutcher (2004) no mention of the language issue in the plenary sessions of the conference. There is also little consideration of the language issue in the resulting documents from the Forum. There is limited reference in official documents to the fact that millions of children are entering school without knowing the language of instruction. Many of these children are in Africa. The only type of formal schooling available to these children is in a language they neither speak nor understand. Nadine Dutcher (2004:8) holds:

It is shocking that the international dialogue on Education for All has not confronted the problems children face when they enter school not understanding the medium of instruction, when they are expected to **learn** a new language at the same time as they are learning **in** and **through** the new language. **The basic problem is that children cannot understand what the teacher is saying!** We believe that if international planners had faced these issues on a global scale, there would have been progress to report. However, instead of making changes that would lead to real advancement, the international community has simply repledged itself to the same goals, merely moving the target ahead from the year 2000 to 2015.

With the help of ex-patriate consultants teacher guides are being worked out and teacher training courses given to have African teachers become more “learner-centred”, to help them activate their students and engage them in critical thinking and dialogue. Teachers are asked to abandon a teacher style where students just copy notes from the blackboard, learn their notes by heart and repeat them at tests. Little thought has been given to the fact that this teaching style might be the only one possible when neither the teacher nor the students command the language of instruction. Africa is called anglophone, francophone or lusophone according to the languages introduced by the colonial masters and still used as official languages. These languages are, however, not the languages spoken in Africa. They are

comfortably mastered only by 5 to 10% of the people. The great majority of Africans use African languages for daily communication. Africa is afrophone.

From a socio-political aspect, the use of African national languages in the educational process represents, for those African states making the option, a sign of political sovereignty with regard to the old colonial power, as well as an assertion of their cultural identity, denied in the past by the colonialists through the harsh relegation of African languages to the inferior status of "vernaculars."

Even though educational arguments may be even stronger for using the mother tongue as the language of instruction social cultural arguments are also strong.

Culture is more than language

Will the use of an indigenous language as a language of instruction in school be a guarantee for survival of threatened cultures? Foreign thoughts from foreign cultures in an artificially created environment can be conveyed through local languages. Local culture and curricular content can likewise be conveyed through foreign languages. In an article on the impact of formal education on the Huaorani of Amazonian Ecuador Laura Rival (1993) argues against those who think that the cultural heritage of children will be preserved solely by providing literacy in the mother tongue. "No culture can be reduced to its linguistic expression", she claims (Rival 1993:131). I have argued that languages should be preserved not only to retain culture. Language is more than culture. But likewise culture is not only language. Rival shows what the norms deeply enshrined in the institution of western schooling do to forest life when a school is introduced among a hunter and gatherer group like the Huaorani in the middle of the tropical forest. The institution of schooling itself separates children from their parents, reduces the time they have to learn from the older community members, learn what is necessary and valuable in the kind of society they live. It breaks up the day in a hitherto unknown way and forces a community into a more sedentary life than what they have normally led.

In this paper the following four models will be examined:

	Foreign language	Local language
Foreign content	A) Textbooks written and published abroad in a foreign language adopted for use without any modification	B) Direct translations of e.g. textbooks and curriculum material made abroad
Local content	C) Some well-known authors write from Africa e.g. in the ex-colonial languages	D) Texts taken from the local culture written in the local language

Examples of the four models will be given and their strengths and weaknesses as well as the frequency in which they are used in schooling in Sub-Saharan Africa will be discussed.

A) Textbooks written and published abroad in a foreign language adopted for use without any modification

This is the least desirable of the four models, but unfortunately the one most in use. This is the model we deal with when books from abroad based on a foreign environment are just adopted into another culture. In Norway in the period from 1992 to 1997 the sale of imported literature written in English increased from 150 to 200 Million Kroner. Most of this literature is used as required reading in our universities and colleges. At the same time sale accounts from Norwegian publishers show that the sale of text-books in Norwegian has had no increase at all over the same period. The number of students increased from 105.000 in 1987 to 173 000 in 1997 (Brock-Utne 1999). The imported literature does not deal with Norwegian cases or research conducted in Norway. The content comes from an English-speaking environment.

When it comes to developing countries, foreign books are often given as development aid. I have experienced myself how loads of outdated American text-books have been dumped in African university libraries. In 1996 Madagascar reverted back to using French as language of instruction in secondary school after having used Malgash for several years. In 1997 one of the headmasters in one of the secondary schools told me :”What should we do? We had no textbooks any more. They had been worn out through long use. But the French government gave us all the textbooks as development aid. They are highly irrelevant for us as they are written and produced in

France, but they are all we have got.” Alamin Mazrui (1997) tells that a loan from the World Bank to the education sector in the Central African Republic was given with the conditionalities attached that all the textbooks and even language charts should be bought in France.

B) Direct translations of e.g. textbooks and curriculum material made abroad

Often when learning materials are produced in local languages they are just translations of learning material which have been produced abroad, in Africa often in the country of the former colonial master. Direct translations into a familiar language make learning easier for children. They can now access the leaning material in a language with which they are comfortable. The culture, the examples given are, however, foreign and sometimes so unfamiliar that they are difficult to grasp even in a familiar language. Even in the LOITASA project⁴ (Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa) the teaching material we are using in Kiswahili in Tanzania and in isiXhosa in South Africa is teaching material which originally was written in English and not particularly geared to the culture of the African children.

C) Some well-known authors write from Africa e.g. in the ex-colonial languages

There are well-known African authors like Leopold Senghor, Chinua Achebe, Maryse Condé who write from an African environment but in ex-colonial languages. The Nigerian author Chinua Achebe (1958) is especially known for his widely read novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Leopold Senghor is known for his beautiful poetry taken out of African culture but expressed in French. Maryse Condé (1986) is known for her large novel *Segu* which tells the story of the Traoré-clan in Mali in the years 1790 to 1850. The novel centers around the bambara nobleman Dusika Traoré who is closely connected to the royal family. Maryse Condé wrote her novel in French but it could only be written by someone with a deep knowledge of bambara and the Malian culture. The six delightful books⁵ picturing mama Precious Ramotswe, the cheerful

⁴ For more information on the LOITASA project see Brock-Utne, Desai and Qorro (eds.), 2003; Brock-Utne, Desai and Qorro (eds.), 2004 and Brock-Utne, Desai and Qorro (eds.), 2005. A video/DVD on the project was also produced in South Africa in 2005.

⁵ Six books about mama Ramotswe and the life around her detective agency have appeared. They have all been reprinted many times and translated into several languages. In the list of references only

Botswana private investigator of “traditional build” running the No.1 Ladies Detective agency in Botswana (Smith 1998, 2004) are not only written in English but also by a white expatriate man. Still all the Africans I have spoken with claim that he has really understood the thinking and the culture of the African society and people he is writing about.

It is also possible to produce textbooks with content from Africa but in a foreign language. In Guinea I came across a series of textbooks in French where an effort had been made to situate the content within African culture. This means not only substituting European names with African names and showing pictures of Africans instead of Europeans but also describing scenes which are familiar to the African learner.

D) Texts taken from the local culture written in the local language

This variation is unfortunately the one we see the least, but it does exist. An interesting educational program, known as the Village School Program, was in 1994 put in place for the Ju/'hoansi San children in the Nyae Nyae area in the northeastern part of Otjozondjupa region in Namibia (Brock-Utne, 1997a; Brock-Utne, 2000). The general aim of the Village School Project was to provide basic education in mother tongue for grades 1 to 3. The philosophy of the Village School Programme is that school facilities should be close to where the children live. The school should not divide children from parents. For four of the five village schools school buildings were constructed. In the fifth school the teacher taught under a tree (Pfaffe, 2002). The older people are integrated in these village schools, too. Religion is not taught in the schools since the learners receive their own religion instruction from home. The teachers are from the community and speak the language of the children.

The educational program is geared to the culture of the learner. The language of instruction is the local language Ju/'Hoan. The Ju/'hoansi San children are known not to attend school, but they attend the Village School Programme of the Nyae Nyae Foundation. The reason for this may be the cultural sensitivity of the programme. Part

of the reason why the Ju/'hoansi San have not wanted their children to attend school is that schools have practiced corporal punishment (such punishment has now been outlawed in Namibian schools). Corporal punishment is a practice which goes completely against the Ju/'hoansi San culture. In the Village School Programme such punishment has never been practiced. When the learners get fidgety or bored, the lessons are simply stopped. They then do something else or stop completely for the day (Brock-Utne,1995; Brock-Utne,2000).

According to personal communication from the Nyae Nyae Foundation, the 220 children in the Village School Programme are far ahead of other learners because they learn in their mother tongue and are exposed to culturally sensitive teaching material and teachers whom everyone respects (Brock-Utne, 1995; Brock-Utne, 2000). The production of teaching material was done within the program and great emphasis has been placed on local curriculum development. Joachim Pfaffe (2002) tells that during the course of the project literacy primers of the Ju/'hoan language were developed, based on traditional stories of the Ju/'hoan people. These were collected in the villages of Nyae Nyae by the student teachers themselves. During the subsequent development process of the readers, the original stories were accompanied by illustrations and also didactically adapted for initial literacy teaching. Pfaffe (2002: 161) tells how:

Following the production of the Ju/'hoan literacy primers, their subsequent translation into English promoted the cultural richness of the Ju/'hoan people, and made it accessible to a wider audience. Moreover, the English reader are now offering possibilities for contextually appropriate teaching of English as a foreign language.

The 220 school-children get food through the World Feeding Programme and are supplied with donkeys and donkey - carts as means of transportation.⁶

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⁶ On a trip to the Kalahari desert in Botswana in the beginning of September 1997 Brock-Utne (1997b). again met a group of children of the San people, the Basarwa, and thought how much better it would have been for them to have had the teaching the Nyae Nyae Foundation of Namibia provided. The Basarwa children were living in hostels near a school far away from their parents and were taught through languages they did not understand. The food they received was of very low quality nutritionally.

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