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Article

Challenges to the Acquisition of Literacy in Rural Primary Schools in Northern Uganda

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Abstract

Literacy in the early years is crucial but attained amidst various challenges, especially in the Global South. Based on fieldwork conducted in October 2018 in four primary schools in Gulu district, Acoli region, northern Uganda, this study investigates school characteristics and facilities available to learners and teachers to scaffold the acquisition of literacy in the early years of schooling. These are discussed within the framework of Uganda's mother-tongue education programme with a focus on the challenges of literacy acquisition. Data were collected from four schools by means of questionnaires, classroom interactions, and interviews, and were analysed through triangulation. The findings suggest that there are difficulties to attaining literacy within the MT education programme. Some of the challenges relate to teachers' attitudes and practices, lack of school materials, poor school conditions, and large learner numbers per class. The implications of the observed challenges to literacy acquisition are discussed.

Keywords: literacy; mother-tongue education; teacher training; school dropout rate; Uganda

1. Introduction

This article discusses challenges to Uganda's mother-tongue education programme and literacy as encountered in Gulu district, Acoli region, northern Uganda.

While measures are in place to advance the level of literacy among Ugandan children, progress is rather slow in rural settings. Whereas this is true for many rural areas in the country, the situation in northern Uganda is unique owing to the effects of over twenty years of civil war there. The challenge of literacy levels is greater in northern Uganda than elsewhere in the country but, at the same time, there are many hands joining up on

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various fronts to reduce the magnitude of the problem. The gravity of the problem of low literacy levels and the enormity of the interest and interventions to address the issue create quite complex scenarios. This study is based on fieldwork conducted in October 2018 in four primary schools.

In the rest of this introductory section, we discuss Uganda's mother-tongue education programme and literacy levels in the country. In section two, we discuss previous topical literature and provide background on the area where our study was conducted. Thereafter, we discuss our methodology before proceeding to a discussion of our study's results, followed by some closing remarks.

Since UNESCO's 1953 call for the use of mother tongues (MT) in education, African countries have employed children's MTs in education to varying degrees, and yet this practice is fraught with challenges. As language and literacy researchers, we endeavour to understand the language policies in place and the language programmes and practices in different contexts, and how these are implemented (cf. Early and Norton 2014). Accordingly, we set out to understand the circumstances under which MT education is implemented and the challenges of attaining literacy within the MT education programme in northern Uganda. Initial education through the MT reportedly comes with, among others, the following advantages: it eases the process of acquiring literacy, raises the level of literacy, encourages children to remain in school, and bridges the gap between teachers and parents (Benson 2004; Dutcher 2003). This article focuses on literacy acquisition and learning within the MT programme in Uganda.

There is no internationally accepted definition of literacy (Keefe and Copeland 2011) but in this article, we will adapt the definition by UNESCO (Montoya 2018): "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts." As pointed out above, studies have demonstrated that literacy, for example, in the form of reading, writing and counting, is achieved more quickly and easily through a child's MT (Alidou 2011; Benson 2008b; Brock-Utne 2010; Dutcher 2003). The introduction of MT education in Uganda is motivated by the above insight.

When the levels of literacy acquisition in Uganda became worse (Read and Enyutu 2004), MT education was introduced in 2006/2007. The language-in-education policy spelt out in the *Government White Paper* of 1992 (Uganda 1992) is implemented through the MT programme. The policy requires all schools to choose a dominant language in the community and use it as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT) for the first three years while English and the MT are taught as subjects. Where the choice of such a language is not possible, English is taken up as the LoLT. The fourth year, Primary (P) 4, is transitional in that a switch to English is introduced and, from P5 onwards, English becomes the LoLT.

The MT education programme was introduced together with a new curriculum—the thematic curriculum—by the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC 2006; 2011). The thematic curriculum was arrived at after a study that reviewed the former subject-based curriculum. Read and Enyutu's (2004) study found that "one of the factors causing poor learner performance in literacy, numeracy and life skills were the structure of the Primary School Curriculum" (quoted in NCDC 2011, 4). Part of the solution to this was viewed to be "the presentation of learning experiences through the media, *especially languages* in which the learners were already proficient" (NCDC 2011; emphasis added). Countrywide, the implementation of the MT programme and the thematic curriculum began in 2008 (Altinyelken 2010).

Despite the policy having been implemented for over 12 years now, the challenge of literacy is still immense in northern Uganda. Assessments have been conducted to show how children fare in literacy levels. For instance, Uwezo, an organisation in East Africa that reviews learners' progress in education, evaluates learners between P3 and P7 classes, in age ranges of 6 to 16. The children are examined largely on P2-level work in English, a local language, and numeracy. In 2016, Uwezo found that the competence of learners in reading English and numeracy was 25.2% in Gulu district. In comparative data from the National Assessment of Progress in Education (NAPE), P1 to P3 learners are assessed in English and local languages in government schools. NAPE reports that in 2016, 26.8% of learners were able to identify 4 out of 5 Acoli[1] letters; this grew to 46.8% (Uganda National Examinations Board 2017). In the 2010 Research Triangle International Report (Piper 2010) in which the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tool was applied, the results were even worse: between 90% and 91% learners in the North did not understand what they read in their MTs. Piper (2010) argues that if the assessments were done in English, the results would have been worse.

Amidst these challenges of poor literacy levels, the government and other non-government organisations as well as individuals have joined the effort to address the challenge of literacy in northern Uganda. On the government side, as already mentioned, space has been opened up for MT education, and it is within the framework of the MT programme that various efforts are being made to raise literacy levels, e.g. by Literacy and Adult Basic Education (LABE; Heugh and Namyalo 2017; Tumwebaze 2012), Leblaŋo Literacy Project (Mango Tree Laŋo Literacy Project 2010; 2013), and Save the Children-Uganda. The current study is therefore relevant in exploring the circumstances under which MT education is implemented and the challenges that learners and teachers experience in the process of literacy acquisition within the MT programme.

1 Acoli is the language spoken in Gulu in which the current study was conducted.

2. Background and Study Context

2.1 Previous Studies on MT Education in Uganda

Overall, language, particularly learners' MTs, is repeatedly pointed out as one of the reasons for the low levels of literacy in African countries (Abiria, Early and Kendrick 2013; Bamgbose 2014; Shoba and Chimbutane 2013). Previous studies on MT education in Uganda have highlighted the circumstances under which children in rural contexts learn and are taught literacy skills through their MTs. Abiria, Early, and Kendrick (2013) studied teachers' plurilingual practices in northern Uganda; they found that teachers had training-related challenges. For example, all teachers were trained under an English-only programme and so it is challenging for them to adjust their practices to teaching in MTs. However, amidst this challenge, some teachers were creative and supported the MT programme by making use of learners' multiple languages by calling upon those who knew other learners' languages to help with translations whenever such a need arose. Abiria, Early and Kendrick's (2013) study demonstrates how plurilingualism can be promoted in the learning context. Ssentanda (2013; 2014a; 2014b) singles out three issues that impact on the literacy learning and teaching of rural learners: First, the poor language policy does not enable rural learners that attend government schools to have an opportunity to attend pre-primary. This adversely affects their journey to learning and being taught literacy. Second, the inadequate time allocated to preparing teachers prior to the introduction of an educational programme largely leaves teachers uncertain of what they are supposed to do. Third, the pre-service training that teachers receive in colleges does not match MT education practices (cf. Abiria, Early and Kendrick 2013).

Furthermore, Ssentanda (2016) demonstrates that teachers in rural areas are uneasy with the implementation of the MT programme. For example, they are aware that after P4, the policy does not allow them to use the MT but the classroom environment calls for its use and so they use the MT in P5, but in fear that they might be apprehended. Furthermore, Tembe and Norton (2008) reported on the indifference of community members with regard to their children's learning and being taught in their MTs. The community in the rural context that Tembe and Norton studied preferred English and Luganda, languages that were not the MTs of their children. Banda and Kirunda's (2005) study found that rural learners get little or no support from parents, have very limited exposure to written materials that would initiate them into the process of literacy acquisition, and have many home chores to attend to in addition to their schoolwork.

Elsewhere, in comparative studies, researchers have investigated the challenges affecting both literacy acquisition and MT education. For example, Mohangi et al. (2016) and Zhang (2006) emphasise the need to focus on teachers as they are at the centre of rural community schools. We will show that the interviews we had with NGOs working with teachers underscored the need to train and sensitise teachers to issues of MT education and materials design/development. In addition, Ngwaru and

Opoku-Amankwa (2010) discuss the challenges that children in Ghana and Zimbabwe experience in literacy acquisition, for instance, the use of English in classes at school and how this affects learning. Teachers who choose to use English only and neglect learners' familiar languages have a quiet and non-responsive class compared to one where the teacher welcomes learners' MTs (cf. Chick 1996; Hornberger and Chick 2001). Also, they discuss the challenges that rural learners have at home—they must attend to home chores every day and have no time to read their books, should they have books. Furthermore, McKinney (2017) also explains that the teaching of MT and use of the MTs as LoLT is greatly affected by incorrect language-in-education policies and poor teacher training and practices. She asks a profound question: "How is it possible that the most valuable resource a child brings to formal schooling, language, can be consistently recast as a problem?" (McKinney 2017, xv).

Although some of these studies provide an understanding of some of the challenges faced by learners and teachers in the teaching of and learning through MTs, the circumstances and contexts in which the studies were carried out differ. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the unique "ecological and socio-cultural conditions of economically disadvantaged communities and how such factors affect education and literacy development" (Ngwaru and Opoku-Amankwa 2010, 296).

In the section that follows, we discuss the study context relating to the history of Gulu, our study area. This history will help us to appreciate the context and the magnitude of the challenges faced by both learners and teachers in the process of literacy acquisition through the MT in Gulu district.

2.2 Study Context

According to the Education Monograph Report (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2017), the population in rural Uganda is higher at 78.9% than the urban one at 21.1%. Despite these statistics, the availability of schools in rural areas is limited compared to urban areas (Ministry of Education and Sports 2016). Moreover, rural areas are known to have fewer and poorer facilities that support education. For example, there are fewer schools in communities, poor means of transport, fewer teachers, school attendance problems, poor school conditions, learners with varied backgrounds, and classes with large learner numbers. (Ministry of Education and Sports 2016; Mohangi et al. 2016; Uwezo 2016). Children in rural areas walk longer distances compared to those in urban areas (Ministry of Education and Sports 2016); this is detrimental to their concentration at school. In addition, the school attendance rate in rural areas and particularly in northern Uganda is reported to be the lowest in the country (78%) (Ministry of Education and Sports 2016). The Acoli region, the larger area of our study, is reported to have a school enrolment of 4.5% compared to 12% in the central region (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2017, 19).

Northern Uganda suffered an insurgency by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony. It is reported to have started in 1986 and ended in about 2010

(Globalsecurity.org, n.d.). During the more than twenty years of war, various human activities were interrupted. For example, the rebels abducted children from schools; schools therefore could not operate normally, economic activities were disrupted, communities were displaced, a great number of parents died and left children uncared for, and many people left the region and settled in other parts of the country. These challenges were later to have an impact on the education sector and affect the running of education institutions in general.

In the circumstances described above, many people in this area lost their livelihood, including access to education. This therefore means that facilities to support education attainment, particularly in the early years, are in the process of being rebuilt. Accordingly, since the war ended, a number of non-government bodies have come to join hands to provide support facilities, including learning and teaching materials; to train teachers; train community members to support and encourage children to acquire literacy skills: and sensitise communities to the value of MT education and education in general. This background is important when discussing the circumstances under which MT education is implemented and the conditions in which children acquire literacy skills in the Acoli region.

3. Methodology

This section discusses the methods and procedure followed to access schools and how we went about the collection of data for this study. The research questions that guided this study are:

(i) What resources and facilities are available for MT education in northern Uganda? and

(ii) What challenges do teachers and learners experience in the process of teaching and learning literacy in the early years through the MT?

3.1 Research Design and Participant Selection

Our study is largely descriptive in nature. We employed participant observation and interviewing to collect data (see section 3.4). In addition, we made use of questionnaires to collect teacher descriptor data and views on mother tongue education implementation which later guided us in our interviews. The selection of the study schools was done through guided purposive sampling. All the schools were selected through the guidance of the District Education Officer (DEO) for Gulu district. In section 3.2, we explain why the choice of study schools was done via the DEO.

3.2 Study Procedure and Access to Study Schools

We obtained ethical clearance from Makerere University's institutional review board, that is, Makerere School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, and the local authorities in Gulu.

In addition, we went to Gulu with letters of introduction from the Head of Department of African Languages at Makerere University. We were advised to first visit the DEO's office to seek permission before proceeding to any school. It was clear that there were several gatekeepers on our path to the study schools. We first visited the office of the DEO. The DEO advised on schools that would be informative to our study. He gave us the telephone numbers of the identified schools' head teachers to alert them of our visit to their schools. The DEO however advised us to first visit the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) before we could proceed. The CAO is the government representative in the district. The CAO also referred us to the Residential District Commissioner (RDC), who also asked us to see the District Internal Security Officer (DISO). For security reasons, the DISO had several questions to ask us before he could give us clearance to proceed. When he was sure that we were not a threat, he let us go ahead with our work. As Gulu district has previously suffered from rebel activities, access to schools is highly controlled for fear of possible recruitment of children into rebel groups.

It is therefore advisable that when one is to do fieldwork in any of the districts in northern Uganda to report to the security personnel offices beforehand. Also, we observed that since education is only being revived in this region after a long history of interruption, the DEO's personnel would be more qualified to advise on which schools to visit.

One of the challenges we faced is that some respondents were not comfortable with being recorded. We therefore relied on notetaking to capture issues in the discussions. Since we were two interviewers, it was possible for us to compare notes and fill in gaps in case one person had missed something.

We would like to emphasise that the sample of four schools is not representative of northern Uganda districts. Therefore, the challenges of teaching and learning through the MT as well as the challenges of literacy acquisition noted may not be entirely applicable to the whole bloc of northern Uganda. However, the impressions gleaned from this sample should cause us to appreciate the circumstances under which children in northern Uganda learn and acquire literacy skills.

3.3 Background on the Study Schools

Three of the schools visited were rural, one urban; three were government schools and one private. We chose more government schools because we wanted to get a better understanding of how government schools handle the MT education programme, having already been told by the DEO that private schools only instruct through English (cf. Ssentanda 2013 on teaching the MT in rural schools). We however involved one private school in order to get a sense of how classroom interactions in Primary (P) 1 and P2 are facilitated. The table below shows the schools visited and the learner numbers of each class. Our study considered P1–P3 for two reasons. First, these are the initial years in government schools when learners are first introduced to reading and writing, as many government schools do not have pre-primary sections (Ssentanda 2014a). Second, the MT education programme requires instruction through MT from P1 to P3. Thus, we wanted to understand how teachers teach the MT and how they use the MT as LoLT to facilitate the acquisition of literacy skills.

Table 1: Showing School Enrolment in Study Schools

School name	**Class learner numbers P1**	**P2**	**P3**
School C-G	190	120	122
School P-G	85	110	130
School D-P	64	85	85
School B-G	84	63	90

All government schools, i.e., School C-G, School P-G and school B-G, had permanent buildings and were all lockable, except for school P-G whose classes had no window shutters and doors. All classes had desks but because learner numbers are large, learners were cramped in their seats. Private school D-P also had permanent buildings, but it did not have walls which reached the roof. As a result, there was noise from adjacent classes which could disrupt the teaching and learning process. Although learners did not show signs of being distracted by such noise, this is not conducive to learning. In addition, classes at this school did not have desks or tables for learners to write on. Learners of P1, P2 and P3 had to use their laps to write on; this is quite uncomfortable given their age. Moreover, the classes at this school had uncemented floors; the classes were therefore very dusty. On a rainy or windy day, learners occupying such classes would certainly have a rough time. The government schools had a few wall charts in P1 and P2. However, teachers reported that since classes were not properly lockable, charts and other learning materials were frequently stolen, and at times they feel discouraged from developing more.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were collected between October and November 2018. We collected the data by using three methods, namely, questionnaires, classroom observations, and interviews, in order to enhance the triangulation process (Creswell and Clark 2007). Questionnaires were used to collect general information about the teachers and the schools, the language diversity of the learners, teachers and the schools, teachers' knowledge of MT education and its importance, resources and facilities available for MT teaching, and recommendations regarding MT teaching. The classroom observations (and school visits in general) were supplemented by taking field notes to record observable behaviour of teachers in and outside of the classroom at school. In addition, we engaged with staff of two NGOs directly involved in MT education and working in northern Uganda. We interviewed them to get a sense of how they carry out their work in relation to MT teaching and promotion. The classroom observations were done in order to identify the languages used in the teaching and learning process (classes P1–P3), language strategies used by teachers, and classroom materials available to teachers and learners, and generally to observe the environment in which learning takes place. However, although we might make mention of the classroom interaction environment, we do not discuss this matter here owing to the scope of this article.

Interviews were conducted with teachers at the study schools as well as with two personnel members working with Save the Children, and two with Mango Tree Laŋo Literacy Project in order to understand the activities they are involved in and how they go about their work of supporting teachers and schools in MT education and education in general. In addition, in the schools which we visited, after classroom observations, we would have a short debriefing session with the teachers on some issues that we observed in class in relation to MT use.

Our visits to every school lasted an entire school day. We arrived at each school by 8:00 a.m. and left at the close of the school day. The time we spent at each school enabled us to interact with teachers for a longer time, and so we were able to learn and see several things in the context of each school. On reaching each school, we visited the head teacher's office for introductions and to seek permission to carry out a study in their school. In two of the government schools, the head teacher informed us that the DEO had already alerted them to our coming. This made our visits to the schools much easier as teachers had the assurance that our coming to their school was not in any way intended to interrupt their work or to "spy" on them.

4. Study Results and Discussion

Gulu district has Acoli (LebAcöli) as its dominant local language. All three government schools visited instructed through Acoli for P1–P3 classes while the private school instructed through English. Classroom observations at each school were done in at least two lessons in each class at every school. In the following subsections, we will show the contextual challenges that learners face in the process of acquiring literacy skills under the MT education programme.

Based on a thematic approach to data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Saldana 2009), we filtered out 5 themes, namely, (1) resources to support MT education and literacy acquisition; (2) resource-related challenges; (3) access-related challenges; (4) teacher attitude and training-related challenges; and (5) infrastructure and materials provisioning challenges. The first theme relates to the first research question and the other four relate to the second research question (see section 3). We discuss these themes individually below.

4.1 Resources to Support MT Education and Literacy Acquisition

Even though we report on the challenges of context within the MT education programme in the studied area, there are some resources and facilities available that are worth mentioning. For example, teachers reported on the questionnaires that they (teachers) and their learners are MT speakers of Acoli. This means that MT education should be possible as teachers and learners share the same language. In fact, there were no language differences reported between teachers and learners that would hinder the process of MT teaching.

Furthermore, the presence of various NGOs and Community Social Organisations (CSOs) (cf. Masaazi, Ssentanda and Ngaka 2018) working in Gulu district to enhance teaching and learning through the MT is a great resource. When we interacted with the DEO, he pointed out the following NGOs and organisations as involved in education activities in northern Uganda: Save the Children, Northern Uganda Basic Education, One Vision, I Am Learning, Hope Is Education International, and LABE. Others include RTI, SIL International and Mango Tree Laŋo Literacy Project and the District Language Boards. For logistical reasons, we were not able to reach out to every organisation mentioned above. All these bodies work with varying strategies. There are many NGOs and CSOs in this area, particularly because of its history; in a way, these organisations are extending aid to the communities in this region. These NGOs and CSOs have played a significant role to supplement the work of government in the implementation of MT education in Uganda. For example, teachers reported that RTI, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and the NCDC, has supplied them with school materials in P1,

P2 and P3 written in learners' MT. Teachers were observed using these materials in classrooms. The blurb on these materials appeared as follows:

> This early grade reading material is developed with the support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the USAID/Uganda School Health and Reading Program (Cooperative Agreement No. AID-617-12-00002) implemented by RTI International with Technical Assistance from SIL LEAD and VSO International. The content of this document does not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

Apart from supply of materials, teachers also reported that they received training support from various NGOs. For example, a P2 teacher at School P-G, when asked whether they get any support from the Ministry of Education for MT education, had this to say:

> Yes, there is an organisation, I think it is direct from the Ministry, it is called RTI. So, they were the ones actually who facilitated the trainings; they also provided the books for teaching the local language. They are the ones who the government gave everything to do that.

Another teacher at school P-G (P3), when asked on the questionnaire to give any recommendation that would help in the improvement of MT education in their school, wrote

> I feel LABE should conduct more training on ICT on how to develop materials.

Teachers' reports for the trainings were generally helpful, which is why, as mentioned by the teacher at School P-G, they asked for more.

We interacted with staff of Save the Children at their Gulu office. We learned that they are involved in various activities to enhance literacy levels of children in northern Uganda. The personnel at Save the Children informed us that they have two educational projects.

The first project is called Focus. This project gives attention to basic education to complement government efforts. The project on basic education is run in 37 schools in the Gulu, Omoro and Amurata districts. As part of this project, Save the Children trains teachers to enhance their capacity in teaching. They train teachers in materials production and engage with community members to write stories. They also engage with children, through teachers in schools, to write stories, edit them, and have them published. These stories are then given back to the children. The project mostly aims to document traditional stories.

The second project, the literacy boost programme, enhances reading competencies. Under this project, competitions are arranged at school and community level. These

competitions involve letter identification, writing and reading in local languages. Outside of the school environment, Save the Children mobilises people into Reading Clubs in which children meet once a week under the supervision of a community volunteer, a person that the community identifies as capable. This person is responsible for meeting children on a weekly basis to supervise their reading activities and progress.

As for teachers, Save the Children engages them in actual training, coaching and mentorship. Through training, teachers are brought together during holidays, or at weekends if it is urgent, and exchange ideas on how to improve their work. As part of coaching and mentorship, teachers work with tutors and Centre Coordinating Tutors (CCT) at sub-county level with the aim of enhancing their work. Save the Children funds all these activities. Furthermore, Save the Children buys English and local-language books for schools to further enhance learning and literacy acquisition. Save the Children is involved in all these activities because it regards reading as a critical skill which should be acquired in the early stages of leaning through learners' MT.

In sum, the shared linguistic repertories of teachers and learners are considered a great resource as this is the starting point for a successful MT teaching programme. In addition, the activities of NGOs clearly enhance and boost teachers' MT teaching and ultimately literacy development.

4.2 Resource-Related Challenges

Although NGOs offer a hand in providing some materials, we learned, through classroom observations and teachers' follow-up interviews, that a lack of resources, on both teachers' and learners' side, impeded the successful teaching and learning process and certainly the acquisition of literacy skills in P1 through to P3. Classroom observations revealed that there were learners who did not have books and/or pens or pencils. For instance, in a P3 literacy class, after the teacher had taught their lesson and asked learners to do an exercise, learners began to move around asking their friends for a pen. Their friends would tell them to wait until they were done with the exercise and then they would give them the pen to attempt the same exercise or take down notes. Furthermore, interactions with teachers indicated that there were some parents who did not have any sources of income from which they could meet their children's school needs. They therefore sent them to school but without any learning materials, such as books, a school bag, pens and/or pencils and school uniforms. Learners walk long distances to school (this challenge is further elaborated on in the next section). Learners walk long distances to and from school without schoolbags in which to carry their books and pens. on account of their age, they play on their way to and from school and in the process their books may get torn or lose shape. But also, during the rainy season, some learners had their books completely soaked by rain. When such materials are soiled or torn, it is not easy to get a replacement from parents. These circumstances undermined the teaching of the MT as well as the process of literacy acquisition because learners' learning process was disrupted. For example, learners without books and/or

pens/pencils could not practise writing, and yet this skill should be developed in the initial years.

4.3 Access-Related Challenges

The interviews and interactions we had with teachers indicated that there are several issues with access in rural schools. First, the number of learners enrolled in each school was too great. The large learner numbers in classes meant that learners were cramped in class and thus could not write properly or even feel comfortable for the entire school day. Also, some classes had no door or window shutters; this affected learners in some weather conditions, and ultimately their concentration in class was compromised.

Another access-related challenge relates to walking long distances. Although the Ministry of Education deems a 3 km distance reasonable, in reality it is a long distance for learners of P1–P3, aged approximately 6–8 years. According to the *Education Monograph Report* (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2017, 28), the Acoli region at 38.4% is second only to Karamoja in terms of distance to the nearest school, with a total distance of 3 km and above. Teachers in the schools which we visited reported that learners walk distances of between 3–5 km to school; in total, a learner walks about 6–10 km a day. In one of the interviews we had with a P1 teacher, we asked her whether she had learners who missed school and what the cause could be (see conversation below).

1S: Okay. Thank you. So, do you have many learners missing school every day, and what could be the problem?
2T: Very many, every day. Now, especially when there is rain, the small, small children can't manage. It is very far.
3S: How about the distance?
4T: The distance from here is very far. You know other people; now if you want the child to be here at exactly 8.00; the child has to start walking from there when it is 5.00. It is very far; it is very far.
5S: So, are there very few schools around here?
6T: Very few schools around; long distance.

Note that in turn 4 the teacher said that if learners had to be at school by 8:00 a.m., they would start walking to school at 5:00 am. The headteacher at the same school also emphasised that whenever learners do not feel safe to walk to school, they do not leave their homes, or they walk, but halfway along the journey, they return home. This problem becomes more serious when it rains as very young learners cannot walk during the rain to access school (see turn 2 above). The long distance thus affects learners in two ways: First, they are tired when they reach school and so cannot engage with learning activities with full alertness. Second, those who feel unsafe to walk to school alone attend irregularly and so end up missing some learning activities.

Related to access is the absence of pre-primary sections at government schools. Ssentanda (2014a) discusses the implications of the neglect of pre-primary schools in government schools and the impact this has on the progress of learners as well as on the language-in-education policy. Teachers in Gulu also pointed out this concern. For example, a P1 teacher at School C-G voiced her difficulty in handling a P1 class learner who has not had a pre-primary background. She uses the phrase *… from home direct!* to mean that this learner has not gone through pre-primary learning and therefore has no knowledge of what happens in class; the teacher has to start with the learner from scratch (see turn 4).

1M: By the way, do you have a nursery section at this school?
2T: No, it is not there; it is not there.
3M: So, you get these learners with no background …?
4T: No background, from home direct. And you have to teach until that person learns how to write. *[Laughs]*. Eeh, from home direct!

Note that if nursery education were supported in government schools, it would provide for more years of teaching the MT to learners—from the current three years to five or six, if the nursery school uses the MT as LoLT. The absence of pre-primary schooling undermines MT teaching and disrupts the process of literacy acquisition as teachers have a double task in P1—teaching what learners should have learned in pre-primary in addition to the P1 content.

Another access-related challenge identified in this study is children dropping out of school after P4. P1–P3 are instructed through the MT, and English as medium is first introduced in P4 (P4 is the transition class). Teachers reported that after P3, some parents prefer that their children stay home to attend to home chores like digging. Teachers believe that many parents do not see value in education. Perhaps this must be interpreted against the history of this area—i.e. the rebel activities that lasted for nearly 30 years. Many people in this region may never have gone to school. However, we should observe the co-incidence here: parents "choosing" to keep their children at home after P3 and English introduced as LoLT after P3. Although we did not collect data to establish learner enrolments to warrant a claim that a change in the LoLT caused school dropouts in this district, the teachers' voices indicated that this could be a factor. Elsewhere in the literature, it is documented that the MT is a big factor in helping learners to stay in school and continue with their education (Barron 2012; Benson 2008b; Skutnabb-Kangas 2011). The fact that there are voices in this area speaking of children dropping out of school after years of using the MT as LoLT, might signal that MT education should be continued for a longer period than the current three years only. If the dropping out of learners in this area is in fact caused by the introduction of English as LoLT, learners would then be able to stay longer in school if MT as LoLT were applied for more years. Also, even though we have reported that the enrolment rate in the study schools is high, largely owing to the Universal Primary Education programme, literacy levels will remain low because of low completion rates (Bamgbose 2014).

"Unless and until this policy [of introducing English as LoLT in P4] is changed, and every child is allowed to undertake basic MT-based bilingual/multilingual education, the goal of 100% completion of primary education for all pupils will continue to be a mirage" (Bamgbose 2014, 653).

4.4 Teacher-Related Challenges

As mentioned earlier, we engaged teachers to understand their challenges in teaching Acoli. The teachers we interacted with were trained Grade III teachers. We interviewed a teacher at school C-G about how he felt about the teaching of Acoli or whether he did it because of policy.

> T: Ah, for me I am not taking it as a policy; it is not a policy issue; though the policy says we have to teach in local language. Because by then when the local language was not yet introduced, we were teaching using the English but at times you can even integrate with local language.

The teacher revealed that he taught Acoli because he had had experience of teaching the language even before the current MT programme was introduced. We later understood that the teacher had taught for 37 years, as indicated in the following conversation.

> 1A: Are you the only one in that class?
> 2T: No, we are two but the other one does not teach Acoli; she teaches English.
> 3A: For how long have you been teaching Acoli?
> 4T: For all the time I have taught.
> 5A: How many years?
> 6T: It is almost coming to 37 years.
> 7A: 37 years teaching Acoli?
> 8T: Yes, but I also teach English in upper classes. Even for all that period, I have been teaching English [in] P7, local language [in] lower classes.

Note that the teacher interviewed here had taught for 37 years and that the experience of training he refers to here is different from what is currently offered to teachers in teacher training colleges in Uganda. The interviewed teacher attended college in 1982 and the education system in Uganda has since undergone many reforms including the *Government White Paper on Education* (Uganda 1992) through which MT education was introduced in Uganda. In another part of the conversation not reproduced here, the teacher mentioned to us that during the time of his training, MTs were taught at colleges. In addition, MTs were taught in primary schools before English would be introduced in the 4th year. He said that they had good language teachers and it is through this experience that he came to understand the value of MT education. This teacher's voice speaks to what Abiria, Early and Kendrick (2013) report regarding the challenge that teachers who have been trained through English only have when it comes to MT teaching. What this then means is that teachers need orientation and sensitisation to empower them to understand and appreciate the value of MT education, especially

because they have not had the opportunity to be trained on how to teach the MT at college.

Note that the teacher at school C-G above speaks of how he enjoys teaching MT and that he does it out of love and experience, not duty. The positive attitude that this teacher holds toward MT teaching comes from the experience he has of MT education. The teacher was trained through a system that supported MT education before introducing English. The teacher reported positive results out of this practice and he resolved to do the same in his teaching practice to help learners bridge the gap between home and school. However, other teachers at the same school reported difficulties of teaching Acoli, largely because they have no experience in doing so. The following conversation with a P1 teacher at School C-G further demonstrates the need for pre-service teacher training to empower teachers to teach MTs.

1T: It is difficult to teach in mother tongue because you don't even know how to write the spelling in mother tongue and yet you have to write all the things in mother tongue. Sometimes you see me putting two dots up; some words are light others are not; it means that word is a lighter word. Some words are having two dots, others are having one. The two dots, it means the words are lighter; now if you do not know how to separate the lighter words and the heavy words, then you get problems.
2M: So, did RTI training help you to know how to write?
2T: [*Laughs*] Yes, that's how I know; through training, now I know.

In this conversation, the teacher clearly explains how challenging the orthography of Acoli is and attributes her writing skills to the training that she received from the RTI staff. Moreover, Acoli is a tonal language and it will therefore present challenges both in writing and pronunciation.

The greatest challenge at hand in the rest of the country is that primary teacher training colleges (PTCs) do not prepare teachers for the MT education programme. PTCs prepare teachers to run an English-only instructed curriculum but, when they are placed in schools, they are required to teach through MTs. There are very few teachers who might be lucky enough to have studied their MTs while in secondary school. The policy thus incorrectly assumes that any teacher who leaves PTC is ready to teach their MT, even without training. Research elsewhere has indicated that this is wrong and in many cases MT programmes fail (Kaplan and Baldauf 2003; Luke 1998). In this regard, Cohen and Ball (1990, 233) pose the question, "But how can teachers teach a mathematics that they never learned, in ways they never experienced?"

Our interactions with staff of Save the Children also revealed that teacher training is lacking in many respects. For example, Save the Children engages teachers in the documentation of traditional stories, which teachers can use in the classroom interactions. The interviewees informed us that the teachers did not know how to write

their MTs; they could not compose stories in their languages, and those who tried did not match the expected standards. Note that MT teaching requires teachers to compose stories and later share them with learners. This means that if they do not know how, the initial literacy of learners in their MTs suffers.

Moreover, some teachers argued that they do not see the value of teaching through the MT while the final examinations— Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE)—are written in English. One of the teachers wrote the following recommendation when asked to mention anything about MT teaching on the questionnaire:

> Teacher 1: I recommend use of the mother tongue as a learning area (subject matter) but not as a medium of instruction or communication for other learning areas. Instead [sic] English language for the rest of the learning areas so as to have adequate foundation for outcome of primary leaving examination, please!!

These voices further demonstrate the attitude that teachers have towards English and their experiences with the English language. For example Abiria, Early and Kendrick (2013) report that teachers who have had training in English at college are so ingrained in English that they believe that the only way to learn English is to teach through it (cf. Benson 2008a). In addition, English being the language of examination at all levels of education in Uganda increases the attitudinal challenge. Teachers therefore focus on the end product (writing examinations in English) rather than the process of reaching the end (the support of the MT programme to enhance the acquisition of English). There is, therefore, a need to persuade teachers of the value of maximising MT teaching and the value this would add to the learning of the English language. This should be done through rigorous teacher-training programmes.

We close this section by quoting verbatim three of the teachers' calls for more training from the NGOs and other organisations working in Gulu district. These teachers' statements were indicated on the questionnaire where we asked them to mention anything regarding the teaching of MT education at their schools.

> Teacher 2: I feel LABE should conduct more training on ICT on how to develop materials.
>
> Teacher 3: Teachers who are teaching the thematic curriculum should get frequent training by CCTs or LABE.
>
> Teacher 4: (i) Only trained and able teachers should be given tasks to teach local languages but not untrained teachers who are always forced by the school authorities to teach any subject in the classes.
> (ii) It is a good initiative but needed a lot of trained teachers and oriented teachers not the modern ones who don't even know their local language/mother tongue.

All the teachers' calls for action point to the need for more training in order to function well in the MT programme. In sum, for teachers to be able to function competently and support the MT programme, which should theoretically raise the levels of literacy in Gulu district, they need thorough preparation and training, which includes preparing them to fight the community's opposition to the MT programme.

4.5 Infrastructure and Material-Provisioning Challenges

The schools in the current study experienced challenges related to infrastructure, some of which have already been alluded to earlier. The data in this regard were obtained from our direct observations of the school conditions outside of classrooms and through classroom observations. For example, School P-G had buildings but did not have window and door shutters. In addition, School P-G, School C-G and School B-G did not have enough desks for learners. Schools D-P had buildings, but their walls did not reach the ceiling and lessons were often interrupted by the neighbouring classes and learners did not have desks on which to write.

Although we have stated earlier that NGOs and organisations working in northern Uganda provide school materials in the form of textbooks, there is still great need in private schools. We did not see teachers use any reading materials in the case of private schools, and yet these children equally need to learn to read and write. Teachers informed us that private schools suffer from funding problems as not all parents are able to meet their fee obligations on time. Also, learners whose parents cannot afford to provide pens, pencils and books need support. It is critical that children have access in their early years to the necessary materials in order to learn to read and write before it is too late.

The issue of infrastructure and provisioning was critical in government schools. For example, a P2 teacher at school C-G mentioned that even though they would have wanted to divide their classes into different streams, space did not allow for this.

> T: We are trying, madam we're trying. But anyway it is very tedious; with the number of pupils you've seen, it is not easy to control them; but we are trying ou[r] level best because if you're to divide a class into two, the classes may not even be there; you find even the teaching materials may not even be there; the teachers alone.

The teacher explains that they work under difficult conditions. This is especially problematic in the P1–P3 classes (cf. Uwezo 2016). When teachers called out learners to write something on the chalk board, learners had to climb on top of desks in order to reach the board. Teachers were also largely kept at the front of the classroom as there was no space for them to roam around the class. With P1–P3 being critical years for building the foundation of literacy, the teachers need to reach every learner and know how they shape letters, make use of their exercise books, etc. Studies have indicated that learners in smaller classes perform better than those in classes with larger learner

numbers (Grogan 2009; Read and Enyutu 2004). This is because the teacher finds it easy to reach every learner and gets to know their learning difficulties and so can offer individual assistance. Large learner numbers also pose problems at the time of assessment.

The private school we visited had smaller learner numbers. This is largely because they charge school fees, yet not many parents in this area can afford to pay these fees. Most parents therefore opt for government schools; hence the large numbers of learners. However, we learned from teachers that there were still too few private schools in the district. Moreover, the private schools that had opened did not offer all classes (P1– P7) because they had just started and added another class each year.

5. Closing Remarks

When all conditions to support the programme are in place, MT education is a vital programme to enhance literacy acquisition. In this article, we have discussed the resources and facilities available for MT education and the contextual challenges in Gulu district and the associated challenges to the acquisition of literacy in the district. The study revealed that there are trained teachers in the study schools but that their training does not match the needs of the MT education programme. In addition, there are education materials provided by the government through the RTI project. Furthermore, there are some school buildings with basic facilities to facilitate the learning and teaching of literacy skills. We have highlighted that the challenges experienced in Gulu should be interpreted against the history of the area, namely the rebel activities that affected this area and interrupted education activities, including teacher training.

Regarding the teacher training challenge, Benson (2004) explains that often, teachers have a number of demands placed on them and yet, often, they are untrained and not well prepared for the job. For example, as Benson explains, teachers in Gulu work with very minimal resources; they have to teach both Acoli and English with no pre-service training and limited in-service training. Moreover, what complicates the matter in the studied government schools is that they have no pre-primary section. They receive learners in P1, *from home direct,* as reported by one teacher and so they start off with these learners from scratch. The notion of *from home direct* means that teachers in government schools have a big task of introducing MT education to learners who have no background of pre-primary. Learners who come *from home direct* complicate the progress of MT education in P1 as teachers must do a lot to prepare these learners for their first experience in school before they can start them off with actual learning in the MT. This greatly undermines the progress of MT education and the benefits there of.

Despite all these challenges viewed against the history of this area, there is hope: many organisations have come up to support teachers in the MT education programme by

training them and by providing teaching and learning materials in the MT. It is therefore hoped that the levels of literacy will pick up.

We call upon the government of Uganda to increase the funding in this area to support children in literacy activities such as provision of more reading materials and classroom facilities like desks and writing materials. Furthermore, MT education should be supported more vigorously, so that children remain in school longer and learn through their familiar languages. Besides, the introduction of pre-primary sections at government schools will enhance MT education in government schools. This level of education should be made compulsory (Ssentanda 2014a) and in the MT so that the children can learn in their MT longer than is currently provided for.

A consideration of plurilingualism in the teaching of Acoli and English would benefit the growth of learners' linguistic repertoire and access to education. The teaching of Acoli for only 3–4 years and the introduction of English only after P4 makes learners' progress in education difficult as they have limited language skills in English. Moreover, research elsewhere has indicated that the early introduction of English leads to education failure (Makoe and Mckinney 2014).

There is also a need to translate all curriculum content into the local languages used in primary schools. Teachers reported difficulty translating such materials on their own (cf. Ssentanda 2013; Ssentanda, Huddlestone and Southwood 2016). Furthermore, the training of teachers should focus on plurilingualism and not monolingualism (Abiria, Early and Kendrick 2013; Banda 2010; Makalela 2016; McKinney 2017). Teachers viewed MTs as an impediment to the teaching and learning of English in the school, largely because the training that they received is purely monolingual. Yet the context which learners in the current study come from is multilingual and the use of monolingualism as a concept should be discouraged as it stifles learning (cf. Banda 2010; Makalela 2016). The training of teachers should focus on building and enhancing learners' plurilingual skills rather than on subtracting it (cf. Ssentanda and Ngwaru 2019). Emphasis should also be placed on incorporating MT teaching into PTC curricula.

Future research could examine the trend of school dropouts in this area in order to determine whether there is a connection between the end of the use of the MT as LoLT and the dropout rate.

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