



f I don't learn English, I'm going to suffer:

Gambian lower basic school children's voice in the medium of instruction debate

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Abstract: This article presents the results of an English Writing Contest that was organized in a public lower basic school in rural Gambia, West Africa, as part of a larger ethnographic research on English and literacy practices in The Gambia. The Gambia is a small 'Anglophone' country in West Africa with a straight-for-English English-only educational policy. In the writing contest, pupils from grade 4 to 6 (199 in sum) were asked to comment on one of the proposed topics: (1) Why it is important for me to learn English, and (2) Why I don't like English. The attitudes toward English in the pupil's compositions were considerably positive. At the same time however, they showed substantial problems writing English words and sentences, typical of "grassroots literacy". The data are used as a from below perspective in the debate on the medium of instruction for African schools. Based on the children's voice, i.e. what they write (contents), and their technical performance, i.e. how they write (form), I will argue against the use of English as a medium of instruction throughout, but also against the argument of linguistic imperialism. Instead, I suggest that the only way forward in this matter is to expand and officialise the as yet unofficial practice of multilingual classroom communication and to introduce local language teaching in the curriculum, both as subject and as language of instruction.

Keywords English, The Gambia, primary education, grassroots literacy, voice, language ideologies

The smallest country in Africa, The Gambia (1.4 million inhabitants) is located in the extreme west of the continent as an enclave in Senegal. A former English colony, the official language of The Gambia is English. This is most felt in school as The Gambia pursues a straight-for-English English-only educational language policy in public and private schools. Besides English, also Arabic has its place in education: in *madrassa* and *daara*, but also in English curriculum schools during the daily hour of Islamic education. The local languages and ethnic groups of The Gambia include Mandinka, Wolof, Fula, Jola, Serahule, Manjago, Aku, Serer, Bambara, and Balanta. Although the name for the ethnic group corresponds with the name for the language, there is no one-to-one relation language-ethnicity. In The Gambia, multilingualism and multiculturalism prevail not only on national level, but also on community and individual level. According to a survey of multilingualism I conducted in two communities with a team of volunteers, the average number of languages spoken per person is 3.5 in our rural sample of 248 interviewees, and 4.1 in our urban sample of 314 interviewees (cf. Juffermans 2006).

Nationwide, Mandinka is the largest ethnic group and is also the most widely spoken first and second language. Fula is the second largest ethnolinguistic group, but their language is not as widely spoken as Wolof, which acts as a language of wider communication in urban Kombo (the urban area in the west of the country comprising the major towns Banjul, Serrekunda, Bakau and Brikama). Contrary to assertions in Todd (1984: 40-41), Crystal (2003: 51), and McArthur (2003: 274), the English-based creole Aku is not widely spoken as a lingua franca in The Gambia (cf. Peter and Wolf 2003). Instead, the Gambian *linguae francae* are Wolof in urban Kombo and Mandinka in the provinces. In the above-mentioned survey, Wolof was claimed to be spoken by 93%, Mandinka by 82%, and English by 71% in our urban sample (Bundung, Serrekunda Central). In our rural sample, Mandinka was claimed to be spoken by 95%, followed by Jola (59%), Wolof (57%) and English (43%).

It is against this background of intense national, community, and individual multilingualism that I started to investigate multilingualism and classroom interaction in a public primary school in rural Gambia, pseudonymously to be called Saateending Lower Basic School (L.B.S.). The pupils of Saateending L.B.S. are mainly Jola (35%), Mandinka (30%), Fula (20%) and Manjago (10%), and virtually all of them have learned to speak Mandinka before they enter school. Still, the national language policy does not encourage the use of any local language in school and prescribes English-only for all. I was interested in the children's perspective on the use of English as an official language of instruction and decided to ask them about it in the form of a writing contest.

The language attitudes discovered in the compositions cannot be regarded as objectively 'measured' but need to be appreciated as deliberately and unnaturally elicited. This is not, however, to say that the attitudes found in the corpus, are less valuable than quantitatively controlled data. The strength of the qualitative constructionist methodology as I use it here, is that it allows for originality and the expression of voices that are otherwise unheard or even silenced in research. Its weakness on the other hand, is that it indispensably needs a minimum of input to get them on the right track. My input, in the form of proposing two topic titles and spelling out difficult words on the blackboard, is thus an important bias for the final results. But this is not something we cannot live with. Educational research can never be a pure description of what is happening. The mere presence

of the researcher in the back (or the front) of the classroom already influences the research data in more or less obtrusive ways. Classroom interaction is definitely not a hygienic laboratory situation under absolute control of the experimental or ethnographic researcher. I can therefore jocularly agree with David Berliner (2002) to call educational research the hardest science of all. It is the responsibility of the qualitative educational researcher not to obscure those facts, but to lay bare the context of production or construction of the research data (this is done in more detail in Juffermans 2005).

By the time I organised the writing contest, I had already spent two weeks in Saateending L.B.S. before the start of the long summer holidays and about ten days directly preceding the writing contest. This is certainly not enough for good ethnographic long-term field research in an anthropological tradition, but was enough for the pupils and teachers to be at least accustomed to my presence. I had observed classroom practices in all of the twelve classes, had introduced myself and the purpose of my visit, had discussions with all of the teachers, and talked to a number of the pupils. Because I socialised with both teachers and pupils in and around school, there was, among pupils, some doubt on my identity and role in the school. Sometimes I was asked whether I was a teacher or a student. During this writing contest, I took the role of teacher and asked grade 4, 5 and 6 pupils to write a composition on two proposed topics: *Why it is important for me to learn English* and *Why I don't like English*.

In the following, I will successively present the negative and positive attitudes vis-à-vis English in the 199 compositions and use the ideas and thoughts articulated by the pupils as a perspective in the medium of instruction debate and the discussion of linguistic imperialism. To allow for the voice of the pupils to resound as clearly and directly as possible, I have included a number of scanned reproductions of their compositions in Addendum.

2. English writing contest

As a starting point for qualitative analysis, I classified the compositions of the English writing contest in categories of relative text length. This classification was also used to find the best compositions and thus the winners of the contest. The compositions of those pupils who could not or did not produce anything original but only copied what I had written on the blackboard, were grouped in category 0; the compositions of those who only produced one single word were classified in category 1; the compositions that offered the onset of a sentence were subsumed in category 2; those with an original full sentence in category 3; and finally, the compositions of the students who wrote several sentences or even a small more or less coherent text were assigned to category 4. Category 0 has to be excluded *a priori* from content analysis, because there is no content to analyse. Most of the category 1 compositions are not very interesting for this purpose either. The remaining compositions (62%, n:124) were divided in three heads: (1) those presenting exclusively positive attitudes toward English, (2) those displaying exclusively negative attitudes, and (3) those offering both positive and negative arguments.

Table 1 shows the distribution of pupils per class in these categories of relative text length and table 2 shows the distribution of positive and negative arguments in the corpus of compositions.

Table 1: The compositions in categories of relative text length

cat.	grade 4	grade 4g	grade 5	grade 6	(total compositions)
0 <i>only copy</i>	15	24	19	12	70
1 <i>word(s)</i>	12	-	5	2	22
2 <i>almost / half sentence</i>	2	3	8	7	20
3 <i>full sentence</i>	6	1	11	22	40
4 <i>text (more sentences)</i>	3	5	24	15	47
(total pupils)	38	33	67	61	(199)

Table 2: The distribution of positive and negative attitudes in the compositions

	grade 4y	grade 4g	grade 5	grade 6	(total compositions)
+ <i>positive</i>	21	7	35	25	70
+/- <i>positive and negative</i>	-	1	-	12	22
- <i>negative</i>	2	1	5	5	20
(total pupils)	23	9	40	42	(124)

It is remarkable that the vast majority of the pupils thematised positive attitudes towards English in their essays. Although they were asked to make a choice and not to comment on both topics, 11% commented on both topics anyway. Almost nine out of ten pupils acknowledged positive values in English, with more than three quarters of them pointing exclusively at positive values. Less than a quarter of the pupils revealed negative attitudes with only a marginal 11% indicating only negative associated with English.

One might object that this overwhelming positiveness could be due to my identity as a European and that the high percentage of positive attitudes has more to do with politeness than with their actual attitudes. At a staff meeting at Saateending LBS, specially convened to discuss my initial research findings, I received a great deal of criticism on my research and the outcomes of it. One teacher argued that the results ‘may not be real’, due to communicative difficulties because my dialect differed from theirs and because I did not enjoy the kind of training Gambian teachers had gone through in order to successfully communicate in the classroom. The same teacher further championed that the topic would have been above their standards and that why-questions are always the most difficult ones to answer. In short, it was impossible for them to do such a thing. Ironically, however, in my analysis, I only take along those compositions in which the exercise was clearly understood.

2.1. Negative attitudes toward English

Of the pupils who commented negatively about English, most argued not to like English because it was “(very) difficult” (e.g., scan 1 in Addendum). In line with the difficult-argument, there is the argument of self-declared incapability as a reason for not liking English, mostly indicated by “cannot” or “can’t”:

(63.12)

Why I don't liKE EnliSh

= because if you can not Yead you canNoT do
EnogliSh"

(42.03)

WhY I don t liKe English

because speaR I dont

A very practical reason not to like English has to do with the negative association with the classroom genre of dictation (see scan 2). This argument was used mainly in the lower categories (i.e., cat. 1 and 2). There were also pupils who took the reasons for their negative attitude toward English for granted, without any further explanation (e.g., 61.04). An argument encountered only once is that "English is not good for me" (e.g., 54.15):

(61.04)

topic 1:

Why it is inPor tant

for me to learn English

NO

(54.15)

topic 2: why I don't

like English

Because it is very diffcult

I don't like English

English is not good for me

English is very very diffcult for me

In an original argument, encountered in a grade 4 composition, English came out worst in a comparison of importance with another product of globalisation, football:

(42.01)

topic 2:

Why I don't like English

Because I whole

JOHN MENDY

He is 11

foot ball is important

In most of the compositions that comment negatively on English, English is not regarded as a language but merely as a school subject. It is not surprising that those who regard English in the first place as dictation show a negative attitude toward English.

2.2. Positive attitudes toward English

The reasons why it is found important to learn English can be classified in four categories: affective reasons, practical or economic reasons, inherent or essentialist reasons, and other reasons. This breakdown should not be seen as too taxonomic as arguments can often be grouped in more than one category.

The most typical affective argument displaying a positive attitude toward English is found in formulations starting with "I like", or in a stronger "I love" variant (see scans 3 and 6):

(44.02)

topic 1:

why it is important for me to learn english

because i like English and i want to speak English

topic 2:

why I like English

because I like English

I want to learn English

Also the comparison of English (as a subject) with another school subject is an affective reason, because it reveals the personal affects toward both subjects. In all the examples in the corpus, it is always mathematics, with which English is being compared. Language (English) and mathematics are traditionally the two most important subjects in the school curriculum and many students differentiate yet early between them in terms of liking and performance. Other pupils displayed a positive attitude toward English because they found it “not difficult”:

(63.19, scan 4)

topic 1

why it is important for me to learn English

BECAUS English is Better then MATHEMATICS

[...]

(63.05)

top 1: deficol

Becos it is no deficol

top 2:

Becos it is no deficol

A further affective reason for a positive attitude toward English is initiated by ‘I want’ (e.g., 44.02 (scan 3) above, and scans 5 and 9). A variation on the theme of ‘I want’ is a phrase that only occurred in grade 4 green, “I’m very happy to learn”. The reason that this phrase only occurred in this particular class is that I, by request, wrote this phrase on the blackboard. A variation on this theme, is “I am very happy to speak a language”, an assertion that silently disqualifies the other tongues in this pupil’s repertoire as languages. As a written and official language, English carries a special status that sets it apart from all the other languages in the Gambian sociolinguistic landscape. Children at an early age already realise this and talk about it in highly marked ideological terms.

(44.04)

[...]

Because I am very happy to speak

a language. English is very Good for

all. I am very happy to ledrn

I want to

English is very good

A far-reaching affective argument pro English, finally, is the assumption that proficiency in English will lead straightforwardly to happiness: “I like English very well because I want very happy” (53.03).

Practical or economic arguments in favour of English often underscore a tool-vision of English. In these attitudes, English is regarded as a useful tool or expensive symbolic capital to achieve something non-linguistic, such as an educational degree, a good job (e.g., scans 6 and 7), or the opportunity to travel. Some children link proficiency in English with very basic material exigencies such as food (e.g., a bag of rice, scans 8, 9) or even cash. Many children make

notice of their desire to assist parents or family in their struggle to make ends meet once they have completed their education and obtained a well-paid job (scan 8 and 9). Less prevalent instrumental values of English that were encountered in the corpus are to write letters and to deal with government (scan 10).

The third category of the positive attitudes towards English contains those arguments in favour of English that refer to inherent, essentialist qualities ascribed to English. A first version of this argument is where English is called 'good' or 'better' or 'best' and the inherent qualities of English are taken for granted (scan 3, 6, and 11). In a second, frequently encountered version of this argument, English is called 'important', mostly without any further explanation as to why English is so important (scans 6 and 13). The abundance of the 'important'-argument is of course triggered by the presence of the word in the very topic title, "Why it is important for me to learn English". A grade 4 pupil however, offered a (practical/economic) reason why English is important: "if I don't learn English I'm going to suffer" (43.35, scan 12).

The fourth category is a rest category and contains attitudes/reasons to like English or to find it important that do not fit in any of the categories above. Most of the compositions subsumed here, employ a very direct logic of self-evidence (e.g., "I like English", 63.13 scan 14). Finally, there was a composition by a boy who seemingly had been engaged in a transnational trajectory from Liberia to The Gambia, who valued the differences of English in The Gambia and English in Liberia arguing that "in The Liberia he like English, but the Gambia is not like English" (64.03).

3. Language ideologies: the medium of instruction debate, linguistic imperialism, and the children's perspective

Language ideologies, as I understand it, are about what people think languages are, should be, and what can or should be done with them, but equally about what people think languages are not, should not be, and what cannot or should not be done with them (see Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Blommaert 1999; Kroskrity 2000). Ideology often has the connotation of delusion, fallacy, or distortion, as not representing the real state of affairs, for example in the Marxist definition of ideology as false consciousness (see Woolard 1998: 7) but as van Dijk (1998: 11) argues, there is not much theoretical ground for such a distinction. Instead, scholars of language ideologies often take the post-structuralist insight that all truth claiming discourses are socially constructed as a starting point and reject the "the existence of an un-ideological, pre-existing truth which is to be situated elsewhere" (Slembrouck 1999-2006, paraphrasing Foucault).

The English writing contest I organised was explicitly designed to find out about what school children thought about English, about the ideologies of English of an otherwise unheard group: school children. The exercise here is to take their voice serious, rather than to analyse it away against some kind of superior theory. I will now discuss two important debates in applied linguistics and bring the Saateending L.B.S. children's perspectives into the discussion to come to a more nuanced and relevant position.

3.1. The medium of instruction debate

There is ample scientific evidence that it is psychologically and educationally favourable to teach a child in a first language as opposed to a second language. The work of Jim Cummins is probably most famous in this respect. He suggests that there is a cognitive interdependence between a first language or literacy (L1)

and an additive language or literacy (L2): “[t]hat is, the development of one language/literacy helps the development of subsequent languages and literacies” (Martin 1999: 72, paraphrasing Cummins). In Cummins’ own words:

L1 literacy and conceptual knowledge constitute central attributes of the individual that help to make academic input in the L2 comprehensible. If a second language learner already understands concept X in her L1 then L2 input containing that concept will be considerably more comprehensible than if she does not understand concept X in her L1. (Cummins 1991: 77-78)

Thus, learning to write or learning new concepts is cognitively much easier when one has already learnt to write the relevant concepts in another language. Ideally, this other language should be the mother tongue or a language closely related to the mother tongue. This is, alas, not happening in The Gambia so far.

In addition to this, Eddie Williams (1996, 2006) argues that English has a very difficult and deep orthography, which makes it extra difficult to “crack the code”, whereas African languages have more recently invented orthographies and remain more shallow (i.e., with a more direct sound-grapheme relation). English spelling is only logic in historical, etymological point of view and it takes a thorough introduction to diachronic English linguistics to see the logic of it. Ironically, in The Gambia, the language with the least transparent orthographic logic is used for literacy acquisition in the most primary levels of education.

According to the headmaster of Saateending L.B.S. (in an interview), the main reason for not offering education in local languages is economic: “it will come for more costs and The Gambia is a poor country [...] and as you have seen, the problems now usually in schools are all connected to resources.” Although money is definitely a concern for education policy makers in The Gambia, I like to believe it is not the only concern. Handbooks for community literacy skills have been developed for almost all Gambian languages and the lower basic curriculum textbook series of Social and Environment Studies is a brilliant, well-thought-out, professional six-volume work in colour print. Also the other subjects have carefully designed textbooks, which show that the Department of State for Education is definitely capable of developing quality curriculum materials. My argument is that if there are means to create all these educational works, than it has to be practicable to develop textbooks for Gambian language education. Although the financial concern, as uttered by the headmaster (“costs”, “resources”, “The Gambia is a poor country”), is certainly there, lack of money is not the sole explaining factor for the hegemony of English in Gambian education. An English glorifying discourse and incontestable belief in the value of English on the side of policy makers is an equally important explaining factor for the current regime of language in Gambian education.

3.2. Linguistic imperialism

The literature on linguistic imperialism is a highly ideological theory that describes the present role of English in the world from an anti-globalist point of view. In his well-quoted *Linguistic Imperialism*, Robert Phillipson (1992) explores the phenomenon of English as a world language (he does this in English), and argues that English has become so dominant worldwide because British and American organizations, such as the British Council have strategically offered ELT “aid” to third world countries. In all these aid operations, English was favoured and local languages were neglected, and the desired result is an increasing dominance of English and a marginalised position of local languages. Phillipson calls this favouring of English and de-favouring of local languages *linguicism* – a

linguistic form of racism: “ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language” (Phillipson 1992: 47). Thus the “working definition of *linguistic imperialism* is that *the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages*” (ibid, italics in original).

Whenever the term linguistic imperialism is used, it is used negatively, emphasizing the excrescences of dominant languages with regard to minority languages. The effect of linguistic imperialism is preferably described where the continuity of minority languages is at stake. Many linguists do not cheer this development and consider it a tremendous loss of linguistic ecology, and see it as an irreparable impoverishment of the planet’s language diversity – a metaphor borrowed from nature conservation discourse (biodiversity). Ricento (2000: 18) paraphrases the critique on Phillipson as coming from two directions:

Some have argued that his model lacks empirical support [...]. Others, mostly sympathetic with many of Phillipson’s ideas, have nonetheless argued that his model is too deterministic and monolithic in its assumptions and conclusions. These scholars, often associated with postmodern theoretical approaches, have offered more nuanced contextualized and historical descriptions of events and practices (Ricento 2000: 18).

Ricento goes on to name Pennycook and Canagarajah as examples of the second group of critics. Pennycook (2000) places linguistic imperialism as one of six theoretical frameworks for understanding the global position of English (colonial-celebrational, laissez-faire liberalism, language ecology, linguistic imperialism, language rights and postcolonial performativity) and critiques it as insensitive to the agency of the linguistically ‘oppressed’:

The problem is, in part, that the notion of linguistic imperialism is in many ways too powerful. If it is only used to map out ways in which English has been deliberately spread, and to show how such policies and practices are connected to larger global forces, it works. [...] But there, by quite rightly problematising the notion of choice, Phillipson runs the danger of implying that choices to use English are nothing but an ideological reflex of linguistic imperialism. Such a position, it might be said, lacks a sense of agency, resistance, or appropriation (Pennycook 2000: 114).

If in the analysis of the pupil’s compositions presented above, we would read the overwhelming positiveness in attitude toward English as the deterministic influence of English imperialism, we would deny them voice and make them powerless victims of globalization, without a will of their own. Although pupils at Saateending L.B.S. do not really have a choice whether or not they learn English (it is the choice of their parents and of Gambian society as a whole), they nevertheless had a choice in the topics I offered them. I see agency at work in their positive attitudes toward English. Although they are somehow forced to learn English, nobody has ever forced them to like it or to acknowledge its importance. The pupils’ attitudes are expressed in full freedom of speech and should therefore be accounted for as genuine voices in the debate of linguistic imperialism.

The discussion of linguistic imperialism is largely played out over the heads of the agents to whom language is supposedly imperialistically forced upon. How can you speak of linguistic imperialism, and combat it intellectually, if an overwhelming majority of lower basic school children in Africa’s smallest country, are very enthusiastic about the imperial language?

3.3. The children's voice

In the whole debates on the medium of instruction and linguistic imperialism, the children's voice is not accounted for. Parents at best, but hardly ever are children listened to when making policy decisions or in educational research. Children are not represented in parliament, do not normally write letters to the editor in newspaper about their concerns and are often overlooked as informants in ethnographic research.

The kind of sociolinguistics I would like to associate with, is inspired by the programmatic agenda for social language research by Cameron *et al* (1992). Sociolinguistic research in that tradition should not only be ethical, or advocating, but even empowering: offering a voice to groups who otherwise remain unheard. This voice comes in two ways: what they say, and how they say it. *What the voice says* here is that they are overwhelmingly (77 to 88 per cent) positive about English. *How the voice says it*, it problematic: a great number of the grade 4 to 6 children found it extremely difficult to write a(n English) composition, even though they had been exposed to English and writing (in English) for at least 3 to 5 years.

What the voice says offers an interesting from below perspective to the discussion of linguistic imperialism. How it is voiced, offers food for thought for local education policy makers. The dominant pedagogical practice of English as sole language of literacy education and medium of instruction throughout the entire curriculum is perhaps not the best possible way to teach. In The Gambia, learning to write does not only mean technically learning to visualize language with a sign system, which is already difficult enough, but at the same time learning a new language that is very different from the language their fathers and mothers speak to them.

The children's perspective that command over English activates multiple societal advantages and is a giant tool in the struggle for a good social position is not something to lightly dismiss as false consciousness. The severe literacy problems in the final grades of lower basic school are not something to lightly dispose of as growing pains either. Both have to be taken serious.

When asked to offer a recommendation for the problem of languages and education in The Gambia, I would suggest to use local languages for early (literacy) education, but therefore not necessarily postponing the introduction of English. If education is best when it mirrors social structures outside the school, multilingual education in one or more Gambian languages and English should be taken into serious consideration. Given the small number of ethnolinguistic groups in The Gambia, this would theoretically not be too difficult to realise. If The Gambia truly wants to inscribe itself in the programmes of Education for All and Rethinking Education for Poverty Reduction (thus the title of a 2003 National Conference on Education), an innovative multilingual education with Gambian languages as languages of instruction and of literacy education and English as a subject only initially, should carve the way forward.

Note: The straight-for-English English-only educational language policy in The Gambia is bound to change as the new education policy prescribes the introduction of local languages as media of instruction in the first three years of basic education and as subjects at the entire basic, senior secondary and higher education levels (DoSE 2004; Ceesay and Jobe 2006).

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because it is difficult
English is difficult for me but I
don't like that subject

scan 1

TOPIC 2: Why I don't like English
Dictation

scan 2

Topic 1
Why it is important
for me to learn
English

because I love English

because it is good

because we like English and

because I want to speak English

you is my friend

I am happy

thank you

scan 3

Why it is important for me to learn English
BECAUSE English is better than Mathematics

scan 4

I liked speak English
because I am very happy
to learn

scan 5

topic 1

Why it is important for me
to learn English?
English is important to me
I love English because
English is the best in the whole
world. if you can speak English
you will get a job.
Look the?
What is your name?
What if you learn English?
because I want to get a best
job

scan 6

why it is important
for me to learn English because
one to be a teacher

scan 7

Topic 1
why it is important
for me to learn
English when I learn English I finish
I will help my mother for buy him a thing
what she like
thank you mala senko

scan 8

because I want to learn the
language if I finish school I will
help my mother and father to buy rice

scan 9

The important of English is that people in Africa have to learn English when you go in some community they speak English. English is one of our languages in Africa so we have to speak English.

scan 10

topic 2

why I you like English it's good

scan 11

topic 1/ Why is important for me to learn English.

English is very important because if I don't learn English I am going to suffer.

scan 12

topic 2: Why I don't like English

Because you didn't know which important is in English

scan 13

topic 2

why I don't like English in the Africa you like English

scan 14

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