

Chapter three: Further evidence from Tanzania, Ghana and Egypt

Language, shame and silence in Tanzanian secondary classrooms

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Background

Dr Laela Adamson is an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Bath. The findings presented here are drawn from her doctoral research, completed at the UCL Institute of Education. This project took an ethnographic approach to exploring students' experiences of negotiating language in schooling in two secondary schools in the Morogoro Region of Tanzania.

Research summary

In contexts where schooling is delivered through a language of instruction (LoI) that is unfamiliar to learners, it has repeatedly been observed that students are reluctant to speak, passive, or are even silent³⁴. This is most commonly attributed to lack of understanding of the language in use in the classroom. Although this is, undoubtedly, an important part of the explanation, the findings from this ethnographic study of students' experiences in two secondary schools in Tanzania show that we must also pay close attention to the socio-emotional context in schools and classrooms. In particular, this research summary focuses on the prevalence of fear and shame in students' experiences of learning, how these emotions contribute to silence, and how the impact of these emotions may be unevenly enacted between and within genders.

In Tanzania, the LoI throughout the seven years of the primary stage in government schools is Kiswahili. Although this is not the home language of all students, for most it is a familiar language because it is widely used as the national language and *lingua franca*. At secondary school, the LoI changes to English. This shift has been described as 'abrupt', has been identified as causing a significant challenge for learners at this important point of transition³⁵. Partly due to the difficulties associated with this language shift, there is a growing private primary sector that offers English-medium schooling for those who can afford it.

In classrooms where the LoI is not a familiar language, such as in Tanzanian secondary schools and the many other contexts mentioned in this policy brief, teachers and students are simultaneously engaged in two learning processes. Students are required to both develop skills in an additional language, in this case English, while at the same time learning new subject content in disciplines such as Physics, Maths and History³⁶. Research into the use of familiar languages to support these parallel processes has highlighted the importance of talk, both informal and formal, for

³⁴ Ouane, A. and Glanz, C. 2011. Optimising Learning, Education and Publishing in Africa: The Language Factor. A Review and Analysis of Theory and Practice in Mother-Tongue and Bilingual Education in sub-Saharan Africa, Hamburg and Tunis Belvédère: UIL and ADEA. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000212602>

³⁵ Gabrieli, P., Sane, E. and Alphonse, R. 2018. From Access to Quality Secondary Education: Developing Language Supportive Textbooks to Enhance Teaching and Learning of Biology Subject in Tanzania. *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science*, 25(1), pp. 1-15. <http://41.78.64.25/handle/20.500.12661/3198>

³⁶ Barrett, A. M. and Bainton, D. 2016. Re-interpreting relevant learning: an evaluative framework for secondary education in a global language. *Comparative Education*, 52(3), pp. 392-407. https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/99041302/Barrett_Bainton_2016_author_s_version_post_print.pdf

both conceptual learning and language development³⁷. Where students are silenced or reluctant to talk, they are effectively excluded from both processes³⁸.

The findings in this research summary are drawn from a wider study of students' experiences and negotiations of language in two secondary schools, one urban and one rural, in the Morogoro Region of Tanzania³⁹. A wide range of data collection methods were used, including classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and the writing of fieldnotes, which included records of informal conversations with students and teachers. Students were not specifically asked about negative emotions they experienced in relation to language. Rather, the prevalence of feelings of fear and shame emerged as a recurring theme in students' explanations for their silence or reluctance to speak in lessons.

Both male and female students in this research spoke about negative emotions leading to reluctance to talk and participate in lessons where English was the LoI. For example, it was a boy in Form 4, his fourth and final year of lower-secondary education, at the rural school, who stated:

"So, they break a person's heart...even if you are interested in speaking, you shouldn't speak...because you are afraid."

Students most frequently spoke about the impact of feelings of fear and shame, often bringing these together and describing a fear relating to anticipation of public shame and humiliation if they made mistakes in English. One girl in Form 2 at the urban school explained that:

"You will be laughed at, which means we are afraid of the shame...fear, again".

In addition to reports of peer laughter and shaming relating to language, it was also observed that teachers frequently used fear and shame as strategies for classroom control. Corporal punishment was commonly practised and was used as a consequence for students who achieved poor test results or were unable to complete homework. Some teachers were also observed mocking students who were unwilling or unable to answer questions in English.

Although both girls and boys experienced these emotions, there were some patterns noticeable from lesson observations and interviews that suggested that gender influenced the options available to students when responding to feelings of fear and shame⁴⁰. For example, while girls consistently spoke of peer laughter as something to be feared, there were examples of boys deliberately playing the fool and seeking to control the laughter. Talking about some of the boys in her class, one girl in Form 2 at the urban school stated:

"There are some who have already got themselves used to it and they speak on purpose to make the class laugh".

A boy from the same class explained that laughing at one another was an important part of male friendships, saying:

"...it's every day... so, with that person, you laugh at him, you laugh at one another... this is something a person is used to."

Girls, however, commonly associated laughter from their peers with the use of cruel words and insults, a practice that they labelled, 'gossiping'. One rural girl in her first year of secondary school explained that this behaviour was particularly pervasive if students tried to practise English outside of lessons, stating:

³⁷ Msimanga, A. and Lelliott, A. 2014. Talking Science in Multilingual Contexts in South Africa: Possibilities and challenges for engagement in learners home languages in high school classrooms. *International Journal of Science Education*, 36 (7), pp. 1159-83. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258629478_Talking_Science_in_Multilingual_Contexts_in_South_Africa_Possibilities_and_challenges_for_engagement_in_learners_home_languages_in_high_school_classrooms

³⁸ Vuzo, M. 2010. Exclusion through Language: A Reflection on Classroom Discourse in Tanzanian Secondary Schools. *Papers in Education and Development*, 29, pp. 14-36. <https://journals.udsm.ac.tz/index.php/ped/article/view/1450>

³⁹ Access the full doctoral thesis. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10105810/>

⁴⁰ There is evidence from different contexts that girls may be more likely to be silenced by negative emotions due to wider societal gender norms (Sane, this policy brief; Ouane and Glanz, 2011).

“they say, “Mh! Look at them with English...they pretend they know English...but they don’t have anything...they are the same as us...quit using English...make way for us”. They are shouting like this...and you don’t even speak again...while all you wanted was to learn...”

In addition to some observable differences in how boys and girls responded to, and coped with, feelings of fear and shame relating to language, there were also clear differences between different girls. These differences were most striking in relation to students’ abilities in English, which were in turn related to their home socio-economic situation and the availability of out-of-school support for English learning. For example, at the urban school, there were a small number of students in each class who had attended private, English-medium primary schooling and so began secondary schooling more comfortable and confident using English. One female student in town explained that, on the first day of Form 1, several teachers had asked who had attended English-medium primary schools:

“We are raising up the hands...and then teacher say, “good, ok” and is starting teaching, and then he just focus on those people who maybe they are from [English] medium schools.” [Student spoke in English].

The fact that these students had a known background in English meant that both teachers and other students relied on them to answer questions and to support others. Their English ability also meant that the risk of making mistakes and being laughed at was significantly reduced. However, these girls still talked about feelings of fear and shame. They also felt they experienced unfair treatment from their peers, who expected those with stronger English to help them with their classwork yet would criticise them if they spoke English outside of lessons. One urban girl lamented that the impact of this was that she could not use English regularly at secondary school, saying:

“I am heart-broken because I am forgetting English”.

This contribution has demonstrated the impact of experiences of fear and shame on students’ participation in classrooms where English is the LoI. Even from this brief discussion, it can be seen that the silencing role played by these negative emotions has a detrimental impact both on students’ opportunities for learning and on their socio-emotional well-being. Patterns have been identified that suggest that some boys may be more resilient to the impact of fear and shame due to gendered behavioural norms. In addition, it has been shown that the impact of these emotions may be experienced differently by different girls, relating to their existing ability in English. Although more research into these patterns is required, these findings indicate that the prevalence of fear and shame in classrooms where English is the LoI works to compound existing gender and socio-economic inequalities in learning.

Recommendations for policy change and research:

- If we are to fully understand students’ experiences of education in contexts where there is an unfamiliar LoI, then we must pay attention to the socio-emotional dimension of those experiences. This will require creating a much more significant space for young people’s voices in language-in-education research.
- Neither language learning, nor content learning, will be effective or equitable in a classroom environment controlled by fear and shame. Interventions to support language learning must address the socio-emotional context of schooling.

Language of instruction and achievement of foundational literacy skills for girls and boys in Ghana

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Background

This contribution identifies the links between LoI and foundational literacy skills for girls and boys based on the authors’ analysis of Ghana’s Complementary Basic Education (CBE) programme. This project was commissioned