

Multilingualism in Nursery Schools: Strategies and Challenges The Case of Bujumbura (Burundi)

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Abstract

One of the main linguistic characteristics of nursery schools in Bujumbura is multilingualism. Children come to those schools with various mother tongues, and suddenly, they see themselves compelled to speak only one language, French, a European language not commonly used in the streets of Bujumbura. Some linguistic adjustments come as a result of this. An analysis of the results from a questionnaire sent to nursery school teachers, from observations and type-recorded material led to the conclusion that the children's first language is not an obstacle to communication at school. If a distance is sometimes created among new comers, it diminishes with the amount of time the child spends in school. Older children in all those nursery schools proved capable of adjusting their speech code to contexts.

Keywords: multilingualism, code-switching, code-mixing, mother tongue, education/learning, nursery school, language choice.

Introduction

Nursery schools are the primary level of education. The transition from home to school backgrounds entails for many children new linguistic adjustments. As a matter of fact, the language used by the child at home may be different from the main language spoken by the new schoolmates, or from the majority language in school, or from the language of instruction (French in this case). The children's young age, their family linguistic backgrounds, and the new social and linguistic constraints in school, are not only new communication challenges, they may also constitute learning assets on which new educational strategies can be built.

In the nursery schools under study, the age of the children ranges from two years nine months to six years. Majority of them come from homes where Kirundi, Kiswahili or Kinyarwanda are the main languages used for communication. Yet, once they enter school, they are required to speak only French, a foreign language partially or totally new to them. But they need to communicate and to learn. How are these two tasks carried out within such linguistic constraints? This study is set to answer this question. It is carried out in four different nursery schools of Bujumbura: Saint Michel Archange, Indépendante, Aux Petites Abeilles, and La Colombière.

The choice of the four nursery schools was based on two main reasons. First of all, one finds there children from various linguistic backgrounds. Secondly, children are under the same linguistic constraint: using French everywhere, while French is not their first language. In the other nursery schools of the capital such as Rohero I, even though children may be multilingual, there is no obligation for them to speak French, or many children may be French native speakers (Ecole Française for example).

Majority of them can understand Kirundi. But there are some who speak Kiswahili, Kinyarwanda, Senegalese and Malian languages. Other languages spoken by some children include English, Chinese, Pakistani, Arabic, Slovenian languages, and some languages from Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The school with a lot of non-African language speakers is Aux Petites Abeilles, with seven Chinese native speakers, three English and one Arabic native speaker. It is also at Aux Petites Abeilles nursery school that one finds many French native speakers. For the other three nursery schools, French as a mother tongue to students is a privilege of only a few, sometimes even nobody in a class. In terms of classroom population, the lowest classes count twenty-two children, while the largest count forty-two. This implies a lot of chances for children to choose their play mates.

Since teachers' language or their attitude to language may have an impact on the children's language use, it is necessary to say a word about their linguistic characteristics. At Saint Michel Archange nursery school, all the teachers are Kirundi native speakers. Beside French and Kirundi which they use fluently, they also have some knowledge of Kiswahili, but use it as a last resort. They even have a negative attitude to Kiswahili. At Indépendante nursery school, only one nursery three teacher has Kirundi as his mother tongue. The other four speak mainly French. Nursery two and nursery three teachers do not speak any African language. At La Colombière, nursery one teacher is a French native speaker, while the three remaining others are Kinyarwanda native speakers, who can also easily communicate in Kirundi, in Kiswahili or in French. The two teachers of Aux Petites Abeilles nursery school speak French and Kirundi fluently, and they can understand Kiswahili and English.

Through answers to a questionnaire, teachers were expected to give information about ways in which children use language inside classroom, the influences on their language use and the potential relationships between language use and learning. The method of observation was used to see the way children communicate

The multilingual phenomenon among young children in Bujumbura, which has never been investigated before, is what constitutes the aim of the following part.

II. Language Use in Multilingual Nursery Schools in Bujumbura

When children do not have enough knowledge of French, either they remain silent or they mix up words from languages which they already know, or they may still resort to paralinguistic devices such as gestures. The last phenomenon is more frequent at La Colombière nursery school. Code-mixing is found at all the schools with the exception of one: Saint Michel Archange. Here, almost all the children are monolingual when they come to start school. They are not used to the phenomenon of language mixing, except for the use of fixed expressions often spoken at school by teachers or peers. That is why, in class, many of them prefer to remain silent since the use of French is required from them while they have no knowledge of this foreign language. At Indépendante and Aux Petites Abeilles nursery schools, the teachers are tolerant and can allow a child to mix up words from many languages. At La Colombière nursery school, a child who does not understand French uses gestures in class. It should be mentioned that here, the use of gestures is a way of communication which children learn as soon as they enter school, because the first year teacher is a monolingual French native speaker.

Concerning children's preference of a given language to others, the teachers at Saint Michel Archange pointed out children's dislike of Kiswahili (we have already seen that the teachers in this nursery school have a negative attitude toward Kiswahili, it may be possible that their attitude influences the children as well). Chinese is also considered as a strange or a funny language by the children studying in first year at Aux Petites Abeilles nursery school. They enjoy repeating to every visitor that those Chinese little kids can speak neither French nor Kirundi, that they say "*Ahon, ahon*".

French, on the other hand, seems to be liked, although many of the children only struggle to speak it. This might be another influence from teachers' and parents' consideration of French as a language for the elites. But, more generally, the language which is not liked by the children is either a minority language (Kiswahili at Saint Michel Archange) or a language which is less used by the children (Chinese at Aux Petites Abeilles).

Similar attitudes to language were reported in Barampama's study. He observed that pupils from some secondary schools in Burundi took French in high esteem because it seems to give them a certain high social status. Kiswahili was less liked because it was a language for uneducated business people, and for bandits! However, nursery school children, on their own, are not yet conscious of the status of those various languages. It is their teachers and their parents who have these attitudes to languages, and their children model their linguistic behavior on them.

The teacher's influence on the children's sociolinguistic behavior is great, and the attention devoted to those children for a good development of their behavior should be proportionally great. The children's language learning ability takes a turn for the better or for the worse depending on whether the teacher's attitude to a given language is positive or negative. Minority language children who fall victims of linguistic marginalization tend, to various degrees, to keep silent until they have mastered the language of the majority, i.e. either French or Kirundi. They cannot easily participate in games with others, whereas it is during games that new words are put into contexts.

During teachers-children interactions, it happens that some children answer in a language different from the one which the teacher used to talk to them. The language a child uses during child-teacher interaction seems to be very much related to the amount of time the child spent in school. All first year teachers reported that this phenomenon is frequent in their class, while the same behavior is not reported in anyone of the nursery three children, except at La Colombière, where the teacher indicated that it happens with two new children who do not speak French. Nursery three children already have some basic French knowledge which they can use for their daily communication at school, and teachers at this advanced level of nursery school can scold them for any linguistic misbehavior. Children therefore are careful to handle language properly.

Teachers' tolerance of some languages depends on whether their children are inside or outside classrooms. During recreation, the majority of teachers are very tolerant about the language used by their children. They know that it is an obligation for the children to play using only French, but they are also aware of the fact that it would be a burden for those children to play in a borrowed language whose elementary vocabulary they ignore. By forcing the children to speak only French during recreation, teachers would be creating an unnatural setting for the learners, which is disadvantageous in language learning. Some teachers, when they identify children who have communication problems, they quickly find out what the children's mother tongue is, so that they immerse them into groups which use that mother tongue in plays. Children who are integrated into a play group of those who speak their mother tongue also learn some new French words from them, in plays (provided that the group is not a minority language speaker, which is already under the complex of marginalization by other children). There are other teachers who, after identifying such children, try to bring them to talk as much as possible, sometimes in the child's preferred language, then progressively with new French words. Another attitude which encourages the children is the teachers' kindness and tolerance. When a

child speaks, even mistakes, they encourage every effort he/she makes, so that he/she feels motivated to go on speaking. New language acquisition is one area where one learns by doing, i.e. by speaking.

The attitude of teachers during lessons is more rigorous than during recreation. French is the language of instruction. In class, no child is allowed to use another language apart from French. When teachers see children breaking the language regulation, their punishment may vary from severe scolding to forcing them to translate the utterance into French. A little tolerance comes in when the teachers really know that the child is nil in French, or when the context is special. At Aux Petites Abeilles nursery school, for instance, teachers can allow their children to use their first language during painting and drawing lessons.

Some teachers who are against any compromise in the child's obligation to speak French, base their position on the fact that a child goes to school to learn. And French is the language for education in Burundi. It is better mastered if children use it for their daily communication at school, in a country where French is not spoken in any home. Those city dwellers who are often multilingual may not favor French in their communication at home, unless the family is French – which is rare. Each language has its setting for use: home is the setting for first language use, and school should be the setting for French use exclusively. Whether this position is right or wrong is not easy to prove. However, we have tried to assess if children's performance in class is a result of their language use.

There is a relationship between children's communication facility and course assimilation. Kiswahili native speakers who are reported to be very slow at acquiring French, have problems answering correctly their teacher's questions at Saint Michel and Indépendante nursery schools. Kirundi native speakers do not perform well at Indépendante nursery school. No French native speaker has learning problems at any of the four nursery schools. Likewise, children whose first language is an African language other than Kirundi or Kiswahili have also no problem in learning. The majority of them already have some French knowledge—often broken French— which they use in their daily communication, but which facilitates understanding and communicating with others inside or outside classrooms.

Children who have problems expressing themselves in class can be divided into three groups: Kirundi native speakers, Kiswahili native speakers, and new comers. This distribution depends on schools. At Saint Michel Archange nursery school, Kiswahili native speakers are the ones who have problems of expression in class. They are a very small minority: fourteen out of more than two hundred children. We have also already mentioned that the teachers in this school have a negative attitude towards Kiswahili, a fact which worsens the marginalization of those few children who have Kiswahili as their first language. At la Colombière and Aux Petites Abeilles nursery schools, Kirundi native speakers and new comers are in this group of children with language problems. It should be mentioned that Kirundi native speakers are a large majority at La Colombière nursery school, while they are a minority at Aux Petites Abeilles nursery school.

Multilingualism in itself is not an obstacle to children's communication. Integration into the new school community is more determining than multilingualism. As for integration, it is due to many factors. The family composition among polygamous parents determines children's group creation and integration at school. There is already a close familiarity existing between siblings, and it ties them together even when they are in a larger school community. Their language has little influence on and is little influenced by the language of their other schoolmates.

Children's personality is also said to be influential. Extraverted children learn a language more quickly than the introverted ones, and therefore they can speak it easily wherever they are, while introverted ones do not behave in this way. They do not dare speak with other children and, while silence can imply intense brain work, it can also mean lack of any effort for some other children.

Another important factor is the other children's attitude to language. Speakers of languages such as Kiswahili at Saint Michel Archange, or Chinese Aux Petites Abeilles, are often ridiculed by their peers. Mockery forces a Chinese speaker to quickly learn another acceptable language for communication, while it pushes a Kiswahili native speaker toward avoidance of others.

III. Language Use: Aspects, Challenges and Solutions

In classrooms, the children's sociolinguistic behavior is closely related to the language they speak, their age and their level of instruction. Ability to speak French gradually increases with age, cognitive maturity, and a more extensive language experience which they gain as they grow up. The same is true of their ability to choose between silence, gestures, inter-language, as ways of expression when their knowledge of French ability to speak French still poor. Moreover, children who speak a minority language do not express themselves in it freely, namely because it is hated and would cause its speaker to be laughed at or scolded, or because it is not understood by others. Another explanation is found in a statement by the UNESCO (1981). In its assessment of possible problems encountered at school by children who speak a minority language, the UNESCO observed that those children are disadvantaged in learning because they can no longer be at ease while speaking this language and their mother tongue does not develop. Consequently, the acquisition of the language of the majority or the

acquisition of the language of instruction cannot be successful. The children belonging to the minority language group become socially isolated and find it hard to learn in the foreign language. The present findings are similar to those of McTear, according to which

a great deal of the work on the causes of educational success and failure has identified language as the key factor. (...) while language is undoubtedly at the heart of learning, it has now replaced I.Q. as an explanation for social and educational disadvantage. Much of the work on the study of language in relation to social class and school failure has claimed that the difference between home and school language is responsible (McTear, 1985:20-21).

Children's mother tongue, and its place in school, play important roles in their academic success or failure.

As for their different linguistic background, it compels them to find a common communication ground. Children are naturally endowed with a capacity to eliminate communication obstacles. Their attitudes to new multilingual contexts has brought Romaine to state that,

in their peer groups formed at school, children correct one another's mistakes. Moreover the groups form even a language community for the child. If the group is formed of multilingual members, one child may use this language with given individuals, depending on their linguistic preferences (Romaine, 1984:183).

For our nursery schools, new school children use their own mother tongue in the recreation group in which languages unknown to them are used. The other members of the group do the same. And, with time, all the children acquire new vocabulary from the others' language, then phrases or full sentences necessary for communication. The majority of those children become able to speak French because of the time they spent with others, and the relationships which have been created among them.

It is hardly impossible to imagine an environment where communication is as challenging as in multilingual nursery schools. Kids meet there not casually, but for group play, group work and study. Integration is not optional, it is a must, for a swift achievement of the goal for which children came to school. That is highly exacting, from the students first, and from their teachers.

The study revealed that the kids spontaneously turn to special interpersonal speech accommodation, characterized by convergence, divergence, code switching and code mixing.

-Convergence

When nursery school children want to please their interlocutors, they are capable of switching to a language which their addressee understands or likes most. At other times, they may choose to use a language considered as more appropriate to the circumstance. This explains why children from the same family, or those who are very familiar, rarely speak a language which is not the language of their group. Convergence is also the reason why some children prefer to use French only when the teacher is around. Either they want to please the teacher and escape an eventual punishment, or they want to impress her.

-Divergence

Divergence is the opposite of convergence. Nursery school children may sometimes choose to create a distance between them and their interlocutors. When the degree of familiarity is very low, or when they do not want it to be created at all, multilingual children are capable of switching to a language which creates a distance between them and their interlocutors. At Indépendante nursery school, for instance, a third year child switched to French when an unfamiliar first year Kiswahili speaker wanted to enter his group. By this switch, the Kiswahili speaker, who felt lost, went back to play in the group of Kiswahili speakers where he belongs. Kiswahili speakers also reinforce such a distance by speaking much more quickly or more loudly when they want Kirundi speakers not to enter their play group.

-Code -switching

A multilingual nursery school child may choose to use one language and not another or to mix words from many languages. Both monolingual and multilingual children can choose to use a formal language style or an informal one while speaking. However, beginners' language stand is clear: they speak in their mother tongue, before understanding and speaking other children's language. The longer they stay in school, the more they adjust to other children's language characteristics. Nursery two and nursery three children can already choose to use their addressee's language, in case they can speak it. When they are in nursery three, children can speak French accurately, and their language choice becomes clear: they use French more than any other language, whoever the addressee is. They will switch from French to another language when communication becomes impossible.

-Code-mixing

Whatever is their level of education, nursery school children can mix up words or phrases from many languages. This tendency increases as the children spend a lot of time together, a process through which they acquire many linguistic elements from their schoolmates. It is a nursery three child who said: "turiko tunagwana". (We are fighting), attaching a Kiswahili infix 'na' to a verb which is Kirundi (kugwana= to fight in Kirundi language).

-Inter-language

It consists of variations within a same language. Among multilingual learners, it consists of mixing parts from

different languages. The above case when a child said: “Turiko tunagwana” can also be illustrative of interlanguage. In other cases, stylistic variations may also take place. According to Fasold, “a speaker chooses to use the language in this way and not in another way depending on whether he is with his peers, his superiors, his inferiors, his family members, his acquaintances, and so on” (Fasold, 1984:180). First year children are unable to make this kind of linguistic adjustment. Young children are naturally spontaneous; they do not yet know much about formal style requirements. But the children’s ability to use less informal style increases with their level of education. It has been observed that older children who are already in nursery two or in nursery three can use an informal style when they are speaking to peers, but that when they talk to their teacher or to someone older than themselves their style becomes less informal. Let us illustrate with an example.

During break time, a teacher at Indépendante took some pictures. A nursery one girl who saw her told her, quite eagerly: “Ndabe” (show me). A nursery two child who saw the pictures exclaimed: “Madame ari na photos nziza” (aunty has nice pictures). Then, this same child told the teacher, in correct French: “Je veux voir les photos” (I want to see the pictures). The utterance here is less imperative than in the previous case, but less polite than what a nursery three child said when he ran to see what others were gathered looking at: “Puis-je regarder les photos, Madame?” (Please, aunty, may I look at the pictures?). From the first to the third child, there is a change from imperative (informal) to very polite language forms as far as requests are concerned. Education, therefore, might have a great influence on children’s language style.

-Difference Between Boys’ and Girls’ Languages

This study enlightened on how boys and girls are not involved in the same recreational activities. With very few exceptions, during break time, some boys like playing football, while others run to the gate near the road and their recreation is mainly about admiring the types of cars passing on the road. You can hear them exclaiming things like: “Toyota yanje” (My Toyota), if they see a Toyota passing, or “Carina yanje” (My Carina), if it is a Carina, or “Dimanche narakubonye muri muri Carina natwe twari muri Corolla” (On Sunday I saw you in a Carina when we were in a Corolla). As for girls, they are involved in activities related to what they often see or do at home: cooking, taking care of younger children, family visit, or protocol. It is not granted that in all the four nursery schools, it is only girls who spontaneously came to talk to the guest researcher and welcome her. In fact, even in modern societies, boys and girls are educated differently. In Bujumbura, Nshinyabigoye (1985) demonstrated how girls are introduced, since their young age, to domestic activities such as taking care of a baby, cleaning the house, welcoming visitors, while boys are often given toys to spend the day with. One of the young boys’ occupation, in this case, consists of mechanical work, such as repairing toy cars, manufacturing parts of cars, driving cars ... These activities are reflected in their language at school.

The impact of teachers on children’s language use on learning will never be emphasized enough. As a case in point, with Saint Michel Archange nursery school, where all the teachers have a negative attitude toward both Kiswahili and Kiswahili speakers, the latter are left at the margins of integration and of learning. If Kirundi native speakers talk to the teacher in Kirundi (which is not allowed), the teacher is likely to offer help, through translation or through gestures. But, if Kiswahili native speakers talk to any teacher in Kiswahili, the teacher is unlikely to offer any help. Instead, the teacher scolds the children and forces them to say the same thing in French, often without help. Such children cannot perform academically like the classmates who get all the attention and help from the teachers. And, indeed, report sheets show that Kiswahili native speakers’ academic performance is often lower than that of other language speakers at this nursery school.

In order to help their children fruitfully, some qualities are required from nursery school teachers. According to Freudenstein (1979:74), nursery school teachers should be those who relate well with young children. He also recommends for teachers a capacity to create a relaxed atmosphere in class. They should be fluent in the language of education, so that their children can take them as models; they should have a flair of miming and a good sense of humor; they should be aware of the differences existing between the children’s languages and the target language, which may cause learning difficulties. In order to facilitate children’s progress in learning the foreign language, teachers should not let their children realize that they can speak their mother tongue. But, this does not imply that teachers should refuse to listen to children who need help. They should be careful while correcting children’s mistakes because, if those corrections are frequent, the resulting frustration may reduce children’s enthusiasm to try and they may end up seeking refuge in silence if they are not sure of the accuracy of what they say. The teacher should therefore be less rigid and refrain from forcing children to comply with the school’s linguistic regulation. Some children choose to break the rule because they have personal and serious reasons for doing so. Sometimes, it is up to the teachers to see if they are not the main cause of the child’s language use failure.

If it is true that forcing children to use a new language may have catastrophic linguistic and learning behaviors, it is also necessary to know that language learning has to be guided, especially if the teacher knows better the language which may be useful to the children’s future. When they are beginners, children who are non-native speakers of the language recommended for use at school no longer easily communicate with others. But, if with time they have mastered it, their chances to learn more successfully increase.

For a good solution to children's language use problems, collaboration between parents and teachers is needed. A child's general cognitive development is not only a teacher's responsibility; it also requires attention from the parents. However, when children are too young to speak any language, patience is needed because, under normal conditions, their language system develops as they grow up.

Conclusion

Even if the children who formed the population of this study come from different linguistic backgrounds, a generalization may be made about their language use. The children's language use depends on many factors. The most noticeable are parents, educators, the level of exposure to a language, personal psychological dispositions, new social relationships created when a child enters school ... There is also a relationship between social integration, linguistic competence and academic performance. Nursery school children who are forced to use French for communication and for learning feel themselves cheated. However, those few children who happen to cross the language barrier grow into adults who speak French fluently like French native speakers.

This level of education in a multilingual environment should attract even more governments' attention, especially since the present global village tends to be multilingual. In our century of globalization, education of multilingual kids should not be left to the care of some untrained, unspecialized or sometimes adventurous teachers. Specialized teachers need to be trained to take care of this multilingualism and education issue.

It is also absurd how teachers and governments should be rigid in implementing the rule requiring children to use French when they know how this European language is spoken by a very small minority of Burundians (although majority of them can write it very correctly). If kids are interested in what happens in school, and when they can communicate well with their new school mates, they take the initiative to use the friend's foreign language without being forced to. Teachers, parents and governments should therefore avoid taking any attitude which may affect negatively the linguistic and academic performance of their (multilingual) children.

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