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


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# Re-imagining a synchronous linguistic landscape of public and school uses of Runyoro-Rutooro and Runyankore-Rukiga in early childhood education in Western Uganda

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## ABSTRACT

Uganda's 'early exit' language policy positions African languages ambiguously in public education provision. Runyoro-Rutooro and Runyankore-Rukiga are spoken in Western Uganda in public spaces where translanguaging happens as a matter of course. These languages are heard at pre-primary and lower primary levels but are superseded by English from primary grade 4. Teachers speak Rutooro, Rukiga and English to varying degrees but must negotiate the different priorities stipulated by the policy within this linguistic landscape as they teach reading to multilingual children. In so doing teachers create linguistic synergies and disjunctures between home, community and school. This exerts a toll both on teachers and on students' capabilities to become proficient in spoken and written local language and English in both the dynamic present, and in the imagined future. This paper reports from a small-scale qualitative cross-sectional study of synergies and disjunctures in language use as children learn to read in local language and English across home, Early Childhood Education and primary school in two sites in Western Uganda. Findings suggest that mitigation of such cognitive wastage in young children by a 'late-exit' policy would support reading proficiency and encourage translanguaging practices, creating synergies with the wider, public use of Ugandan languages.

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## Introduction

A shifting, multilingual reality has characterised East and West Africa for hundreds of years, and how best to accommodate this in formal education systems remains unresolved. Uganda's high level of language diversity and multilingualism is typical of most African countries. With over 40 different local indigenous languages, Bantu languages dominate the Central, Eastern and Western regions, Nilotic languages in the North and North East. Kiswahili and Arabic, as well as languages from refugees from Sudan, Congo, Ethiopia and Eritrea are found in the North, East and in Kampala (Amone 2021; Heugh and Mulumba 2013). English retains its hegemony as the official language and as Tembe (2015) has argued, is an essential part of East African integration, although Kiswahili more recently has the status of a 'working language'.

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The four Bantu languages of Runyoro-Rutooro and Runyankore-Rukiga are in a dialect continuum of closely-related languages spoken in western and south-western Uganda, and mutually intelligible. Some 13 per cent of the population of 44 million speak these languages (UIS/UNESCO 2017; Katushemererwe, Caines, and Buttery 2020). A somewhat artificial language categorisation was undertaken by missionaries who developed a common orthography for Runyankore and Rukiga and similarly for Runyoro and Rutooro (Katushemererwe, Caines, and Buttery 2020). While the umbrella term Runyakitara referencing all four languages was formalised in the 1990s, the effort for homogenisation remains contested (*ibid*). Runyankore-Rukiga and Runyoro-Rutooro are officially recognised as separate, if related, languages for schooling as the medium of instruction [MoI]) in the first four years of primary education.

In government policies for education, local Ugandan languages are widely perceived as facilitating early transfer to English as a second language (L2) (MoES 1992, 2007; NCDC 2005). The Early Learning Framework (NCDC 2005) and the Primary 1- Primary 3 (P1-P3) Thematic Curriculum (NCDC 2006) work in tandem with the language policy (MoES 1992, 2007) to bracket off local languages (LL) and literature to the first three years of schooling. This 'early exit' language policy limits local language use to 'traditional' idioms, riddles, rhymes and stories rather than encouraging the use of African languages to shape the future, a conceptualisation that is given to English (Adejunmobi 2004). Thus the state, despite its ostensible promotion of African languages, positions them ambiguously in schools and, in so doing, sustains the ex-colonial language tradition, reproduces inequities for those without easy access to English which remains a foreign language, and skews the linguistic landscape in both the public sphere and schools.

In the area around Fort Portal, where our research was located, Runyoro-Rutooro is the majority language. Rutooro, as the recognised MoI, predominates at Primary 1-3, and is then superseded by English-only as MoI from Primary 4 even in the more rural Rukiga-speaking areas. Teachers of children beginning to read in schools, who speak Rutooro, Rukiga and English to varying degrees have to negotiate the different priorities stipulated by the policy within this linguistic landscape, and despite their best efforts, these negotiations create both synergies and disjunctures between home, community and school. This exerts a toll both on teachers and on students' capabilities to fully develop their use of spoken and written local language in both the dynamic present, and in the imagined future.

This paper traces those synergies and disjunctures as young children learn to read in local languages and English across home, community, Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDCs) and the first four years of primary school from a small-scale research study carried out in 2017 in Western Uganda. The paper's contributions to the ongoing debate on language policy in education lie in its granular analysis, afforded by the cross-sectional design, of the accumulative effect of asymmetrical language use on teachers' practices and student proficiency across five years of learning and its exploration of the relationship between languages at home, in the community and in school.

The paper is organised as follows: the next section of the literature review draws analytically on Adejunmobi's (2004) work on the historical temporality of African vernaculars and literacy, theories of language interdependence (Cummins 1979, 1989) and translanguaging (Garcia and Wei 2014). Analysis of Uganda's language policy represents the views of Ugandan scholars who see it as a site of struggle within a multilingual society. Details of the cross-sectional research design, the international team, the two research sites, methods and data analysis follow. Findings are organised firstly around language and literacy uses in the home and public spaces and parental views on which languages should be taught at school, and what this then looks like at the two ECDCs. The following findings sections focus on the synergies and disjunctures in how children learn to read in local language and English across P1 to P4 at the rural and then the urban school. The discussion and conclusion summarise these synergies and disjunctures that occur as teachers navigate their way through the edicts of the language policy, with conclusions suggesting that a later-exit language

policy that encourages multilingual translanguaging practices would better support reading development in both local language and English.

### **Languages and learning to read in multilingual contexts**

Adejunmobi (2004) argues that use of the vernacular was encouraged by colonisers, even as European scholars, studying the rhymes, riddles, songs and proverbs furnished by the labour of Africans, infantilised its use and written production; and that vernacular was acquiescent to such ‘political subordination’ (*ibid*, 13–14). African languages became bracketed off within the imaginary of a ‘traditional’ past, and the geographically bounded space of ‘home’ in which European colonisers saw local *lingua franca*s as destabilising and ‘uncivilising’ (*ibid*, 8). Mastering and appropriating the coloniser’s language – English – to transform and change it became a way of speaking back against colonisation, and English remains a high status ‘foreign’ language (Tikly 2016). While current scholarship calls for ‘geographically more extensive imaginations of the local’ (Adejunmobi 2004, 22), this imagination does not yet stretch to more extensive and legitimised use of local languages in Uganda’s schools.

Cummins (1979, 1989) posits that while languages may appear to operate independently in educational settings, they are interdependent and have common underlying cognitive processes, such as abstract thinking. To support the transfer of concepts from a first or familiar language to a second language in classrooms, sound competence through learning in that first language must be achieved, which takes 8–12 years of (Cummins 1989; Piper and Miksic 2011; Heugh and Mulumba 2013). Cummin’s interdependence theory suggests that optimally the first language should not be displaced but continue to be taught alongside the second. Teachers may enact the theory of interdependence, when policy allows, by strategic use of translanguaging to support transition to English when English becomes the formal MoI. Translanguaging is the fluid, relational use of two or more languages where language is conceptualised as emanating from one single linguistic system (Garcia and Wei 2014; Guzula, McKinney, and Tyler 2016; Makalela 2016; Tikly 2016) and of interest to us here as a pedagogic strategy for increasing learner engagement, cognition and educational outcomes in multilingual contexts (Jaspers 2018; De Galbert 2020).

Rich oral language teaching is a prerequisite to learning to read in any language (Nag et al. 2014). Optimally, such teaching occurs both within school and incidentally in and around learners’ homes, supported by diverse reading materials for learners to practise reading with parents or capable others who can model reading and discuss text (Nag et al. 2014; Namazzi and Kendrick 2014; Dowd and Pisani 2013; Heugh and Mulumba 2013; Piper, Schroeder, and Trudell 2015). With shallow transparent orthographies such as those of Rutooro and Rukiga, beginner readers learn how to make rapid sound-to-letter and sound-to-syllable connections and can acquire this initial literacy knowledge relatively quickly. Learning at the higher-level skills of vocabulary, reading continuous text and comprehension, however, takes many years, in parallel with developing spoken language. In multilingual contexts, literacy is both pluralistic and contextualised within wider socioeconomic circumstances (Street 2011; Abiria, Early, and Kendrick 2013). Linguistic and socioeconomic features of the learner’s home environment, reading instruction and oral language skills are all significant in relation to reading comprehension (Dowd and Pisani 2013; Nankindu 2015; Piper, Schroeder, and Trudell 2015). Nankindu (2015) concludes that the practices of multilingualism and translanguaging should be encouraged in schools because they compensate for variables of disadvantage linked to income and occupation.

### **Uganda’s language policy as a site of struggle**

Uganda’s ‘early exit’ LL policy for P1 to 3 was implemented in 2007, marking a turn from the 1970s establishment of English-only as MoI from earliest primary school (MoES 1992, 2007; Katushemerwe, Caines, and Buttery 2020). Current policy specifies that in P4 learners ‘gradually shift from

using the LL to English as MoI' (NCDC 2005, 9), English being a discrete curriculum subject only from P1 to P3. Teachers are mandated 'to use local language especially to explain difficult concepts. It should be noted that use of local language in P4 does not mean teaching by translation' (NCDC 2005, 1). This discourse condones local language use only for specific functions, while its ambiguity leaves teachers with little firm guidance. The benchmarks for literacy by the end of P3 are similar for both local language and English: to read, understand and write short stories and paragraphs. These, while certainly achievable, do not denote the full proficiency in either language which Cummin's interdependence theory advocates, and are challenging benchmarks for those who are absent from school, where there are insufficient textbooks and where the home linguistic landscape does not reflect that of the school's.

Ugandan scholars argue that the language policy is *de facto* 'either / or' – monoglot / monolingual and separates out languages in its insistence that only one local language or English be used or taught at any one time, creating divisions between groups in multilingual contexts, here between Rutooro and Rukiga (Nakayiza 2013; Nankindu 2015). This policy precludes bilingual diglossic approaches and ignores Cummin's interdependence theory and multilingual and translanguaging approaches (Garcia and Wei 2014) that support development of two or more languages simultaneously. Some languages are elevated above others – here Rutooro, and English – with assumptions of unproblematic transfer to English by end of P4 (Abiria, Early, and Kendrick 2013; Nankindu 2015; Namyalo and Nakayiza 2014; Tembe 2015; Katushemerewe, Caines, and Buttery 2020). Urban schools usually use English as MoI since the language policy states that in urban areas and in multilingual communities, English should be used as MoI, sidestepping tensions around local language choice and in such compliance, condoning the use of English from P1.

The 2005 Early Learning Framework for Early Childhood Development (3–6 years of age) (NCDC 2005) declares that settings must use practices 'that reflect local languages, customs and situations' (*ibid*, vii) through 'a stimulating and language-rich environment where we hear many short stories, songs, poems, rhymes, folk songs, riddles, puzzles' (*ibid*, 50); and parents and community are tasked with doing some of this labour (*ibid*, 7). While play-based family involvement is central to literacy, it may also serve to further bracket off local language use within the local geographical as well as temporal space. Policy discourses thus reflect Adejunmobi's (2004) critique, and the instrumentality of parental work in servicing the learning of English.

Developed alongside the Early Learning Framework, the Thematic Curriculum for P1–3 (ages 6–8) is printed in eleven different languages, including Runyankore-Rukiga and Runyoro-Rutooro. The Thematic Curriculum echoes the 'local' of the Early Learning Framework in its rationale for the use of local languages and traditional oral literature, harking back to a romanticised oral cultural past in which these were 'successfully' integrated into 'indigenous' education' (NCDC 2014, 9; Amone 2021).

The language policy also exacerbates regional linguistic inequalities. Nationally, tests in proficiency literacy rates in English show that just 50 per cent of learners at P3 and 53 per cent at P6 met expected benchmarks while LL is not tested (UNEB 2018). According to Uwezo (2016), 54.2 per cent of learners nationally are competent in a local language at P2 level but only by the time they are in P6, indicating slow rates of progress (Uwezo 2016). Learners speaking Luganda, Rutooro and Rukiga progress better than speakers of other Ugandan languages, possibly because of the better economic regions in which they are spoken (Brunette et al. 2019; Uwezo 2016).

The classroom is a site of struggle, with the reproduction of linguistic inequalities impacting on disadvantaged groups (Nannyombi 2011; Tikly 2016). ECDCs have become part of that struggle, with a large gap emerging between children who have attended any form of pre-primary education – the majority English medium to meet parental aspirations – and those who have not and are therefore more dependent on home learning (Ssentanda 2014). In our research area, for example, there is 13.3 per cent net enrolment of children in pre-primary schools, compared to 37.7 per cent in Kampala (UoB 2017, 16). The P4 transition year where English gradually becomes the MoI is also a site of struggle (Abiria, Early, and Kendrick 2013; Heugh and Mulumba 2013;

Ssentanda 2014). What happens linguistically along the way as children learn to read is explored in what follows.

## The study

The research investigated the accumulative effect on young children's reading of their language use and learning over five years through a 'snapshot' of the different linguistic contexts of home and community, ECDC, P1 and P3 and the synergies and disjunctures between these as learners reach P4 and the transition curriculum.

Using purposive and convenience sampling, two sites were selected in contrasting rural and peri-urban areas around Fort Portal where there was a government primary school which adhered to the MoI policy, which most did as the Municipality Education Office uses its authority to mandate LL, and to which the majority of children from a geographically close pre-primary school graduated. The rural area was predominantly occupied by speakers of Rukiga who had migrated and settled there but Rutooro is the MoI.

Qualitative data were collected over a two-week period in June-July 2017, the middle of the school year. Instruments were designed cross-nationally by the research team. For the ECDC provision (both private) we observed lessons of the top ECDCs class and carried out interviews with parents/carers of three learners in the observed class and teachers, conducted in the respondent's preferred language. Parent interviews investigated home and community language and literacy practices, children's activities and reasons for sending their children to pre-primary. At P1, P3 and P4 levels, we observed lessons, noting details of pedagogic practice, language and discourse use and learner engagement. We interviewed the teachers whose lessons we had observed, investigating linguistic and literacy practices in the observed lesson, teacher expectations for learner attainment in reading, and teachers' own language background, literacy practices and professional experience.

Three learners selected by the teacher as representative of ability from each P1, 3 and 4 class read an unfamiliar short story in Rutooro aloud to a researcher and a second story in English. These were based on the Early Grade Reading Assessment formats with literal and inferential comprehension questions offering a glimpse of language attainment across years.

The urban site had separate teachers for Rutooro and English, and learners were streamed for each subject. In the rural site the same class teacher taught each language in separate classes. **Table 1** summarises research sites and data collection information.

As **Table 1** shows, student numbers were generally higher in the rural site until P4 where dropout brought the class size down. These patterns may reflect the better resourcing we found in the urban school: experienced teachers who more skilfully navigated through the language policy, aided by sufficient numbers of textbooks in Rutooro and a more print-rich environment. Additionally, parental livelihoods suggested marginally higher incomes in the urban site, and more incidental exposure to English owing to the school's proximity to a major town. These data reflect the impact of the USAID/RTI funded School Health & Reading Project (SHRP), rolled out from 2013 to most schools in 29 districts over three years and which trained teachers to teach reading in LL and in English, in accordance with the Thematic

**Table 1.** Research sites and data collected in each one.

	Rural site				Urban site				Total
	ECD	P1	P3	P4	ECD	P1	P3	P4	
Grade									
Numbers in each class	18	117	72	49	9	84	55	73	
Lesson observations	2	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	20
Interviews with parents	3				3				6
Interviews with teachers	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	11
Informal reading assessments		3	3	3		3	3	3	18

Curriculum, and provided ample resources (Brunette et al. 2019; Wenske and Ssentanda 2021). The project was unevenly taken up in schools and Districts and at the time of data collection had not yet reached P4 in the rural school.

The team undertook initial data analysis at an in-country workshop in October 2017. Data were further analysed using NVivo 11, with agreed codes applied to all five levels (home, ECDC, P1, P3, P4) such as the nature and extent of exposure to language(s) in the home and community, their functions, child language productions, texts accessed in the home and reading activities, language and educational histories of respondents, family orientations towards learning, nature of school print environment, how teachers teach beginning reading in local languages and English; teacher knowledge about student linguistic and literacy proficiency. Findings were discussed at an international team workshop in Kampala in 2019.

## Empirical findings

This section investigates the synergies and disjunctures in language use across the five sites. We start by looking at language use in the environment of the home and public spaces, to set the linguistic context for how children learn to read in a local language and in English across ECDC and at lower primary school.

### *Languages in the home and public spaces*

In both sites, speakers move between Rutooro and Rukiga, with more Rukiga is spoken in the rural areas to the south. Kiswahili and some English were also ‘mixed in’, more so in the urban spaces, reflecting languages in flux as speakers move between village, town and the borders with the main town on a trunk road, larger markets and tourist destinations of the area. Speakers translanguage as a matter of course in the public and private spaces of the more ‘local’ home, market, workplace and places of worship, creating synergies where there could be linguistic disjunctures:

We support them to speak local languages; for example, we are Bakiga [ethnic Rukiga-speaking group] but the children speak Rutooro because they stay mostly with Batooro (ethnic Rutooro-speaking group) and we don’t disturb [admonish] them for speaking Rutooro. When doing all home chores, they talk to us in Rutooro and we talk to them in Rukiga, mixing English only sometimes. (Rural grandfather)

At work we mix Runyoro-Rutooro and English. A home I use Rutooro. (Urban P4 English teacher)

I use all the languages. English and Rutooro. (Rural mother)

Church services are held separately in either local language or English with a translator, suggesting a more formalised diglossia originating from colonial times, but weddings are always in Rutooro. Kiswahili was sometimes used in the public space of the market, as was English, and for one parent in her work as a tour guide. English was used at home by children when doing schoolwork: ‘When the children are revising, they use English and I find myself also speaking it’ (Rural mother), but not all parents understood English and it was, they said, infrequently used. Sunday school held great significance as a place of learning to read the Bible in Rutooro or Rukiga for parents who had dropped out of school. Parents read the Bible to their children, but some found other texts challenging to read:

I can’t manage ... My daughter is the one that usually reads the textbooks and helps out the one in nursery. (Urban mother)

Parents described some books, toys and calendars in local language at home, with school textbooks mentioned by all as important for learning. All households had mobile phones and listened to a popular children’s Sunday radio programme in Rutooro; some had a TV. Children play using Rutooro with siblings and neighbours, including ‘writ[ing] on doors and walls’ (Urban parent).

Parents were very busy, saying ‘we don’t tell stories anymore’ (Urban parent); and it was older siblings, visitors or neighbourhood children who often helped children read for schoolwork, providing a second site of literacy acquisition outside school (Bernstein 1990; Street 2011). Uses and meanings of literacy in the home/community domains are varied, socially situated and multimodal and do not wholly reflect the traditional oral culture as constructed and imagined in the Early Learning Framework and Thematic Curriculum. Teachers were also busy, but read novels, stories and newspapers in local language and English when they could access them, although this was more difficult in the rural area. In public spaces, spoken Rukiga and particularly Rutooro predominate,

### **Parental support for local language teaching – and English**

Parents supported Rutooro as MoI in early childhood education for the area and which is a discernible shift from Tembe and Norton’s (2008) report that parents in an Eastern rural area wanted English as MoI from the beginning. As one of the four related languages within Runyakitara, Rutooro is commonly understood here, unlike in other Districts where the absence of common languages creates linguistic and political difficulties (Amone 2021). Its use is understood as important in learning to read but also to maintain cultural ties:

It is now [in these days] that they use both Rutooro and English so that they teach our children the Tooro culture. (Urban parent TB)

Parents, however, task schools with doing the work that curriculum texts presume parents will do at home. Parents also expressed their desire for the teaching of English, although language choice at this level was not seen as significant:

*Harulengo rwa nursery orulimi rwoona* [At the nursery level, any language can do]. (Rural grandfather mother)

Despite its peripheral use in the community, the functional advantages of English were widely recognised: two urban mothers wanted both Kiswahili and English to be taught at school as ‘most people usually know and understand English and Kiswahili’. Since English retains its hegemony as MoI from P4 onwards (Abiria, Early, and Kendrick 2013; Namyalo and Nakayiza 2014), parental expectations were that by top nursery class their children ‘will speak basic English’ (Rural mother) or ‘will have learnt and mastered the language’ (Urban mother), giving learners sufficient linguistic capital in English to cope with the P4 transition curriculum. The final year of nursery has become an important ‘transition’ marker of success in P1 onwards, giving rise to disjunctures between fluid use of Rukiga and Rutooro in home and community settings, and the urgent need for school English.

### **Learning in Early Childhood Development Centres**

To meet these parental aspirations, and quietly contradicting the language policy, the rural ECDC advertised itself as English-medium. The teacher reported that the children are ethnically and linguistically ‘Bakiga, Banyankole, Batooro’ and was herself a Rukiga-speaker. New to the area, she was comfortable using Rukiga or Rutooro depending ‘which language the learner is using’. Learning at the ECDC was in ‘both languages’ (meaning Rutooro and English) yet this meant that in practice, despite the multilingual makeup of her class, she continually code-switched or translated from her uncertain English into Rutooro. Stories were told only ‘sometimes but not every day’. Fluency came only when she sang with the children in both Rutooro and English at home-time.

In contrast, the urban ECDC teacher professed to use Rutooro only and adopted a fluid multi-modal approach, singing eleven songs over the two lessons observed and telling a daily story in Rutooro, in accordance with the Framework and in synergy with the language policy. Through her storytelling she taught oral comprehension by asking open questions such as ‘*Noha amanyire*



*enjangu?* (Who knows a cat?) to hook children into the tale and encourage extended oral responses. This use of Rutooro expanded learners' ability to engage with stories at higher levels of comprehension that prioritised meaning-making rather than imitation (Makalela 2016). Her approach enabled children to bring the figured world of their nursery home, strengthening linguistic synergies between home and ECDC.

For learning English, in both the rural and the urban provision, an imagined, more formal school P1 English was imitated: 'This is an apple. Class, What is this?'. Compared with the rural children, the urban ECDC children showed advanced skills, identifying missing vowels in English words rather than just reciting and copying 'an apple' from the board. The rich oral input at the urban ECDC engaged learners in beginning reading and writing primarily in Rutooro, but also developed competence in English.

### **Transition to primary school**

Pedagogic practices did not reflect the 'default' authoritarian teacher-centred pedagogy reported across African countries (Nag et al. 2014, 2; Ssentanda 2014). The SHRP had evidently made an impact here (Brunette et al. 2019). Teachers confidently knew that 'the mother language is the one to build the foreign language' (Urban P4 English teacher), echoing the NCDC of 2005. Up to P4, local language was used to teach early reading in sometimes playful and innovative ways that encouraged the accumulation of literacy skills over three years, in synergy with the wider linguistic landscape but which stopped abruptly as English superseded local language as MoI. The discussion below traces these synergies and disjunctures within each school.

### **Learning to read in the rural primary school across P1, P3 and P4**

The P1 rural teacher reported that only 30 out of 80 in her class had attended ECDC but thought they learnt faster than others, confirming parental aspirations for ECDC and meeting expectations of global policy on its benefits (Ssentanda 2014; UNESCO 2015). This P1 teacher stuck closely to the SHRP schedule for reading in Rutooro:

On Day 1, you have to start with letter sounds, go to letter names, syllables. After that reading the word and then sentence ... We have stories in the textbook on Monday and Wednesday [in the Oral Literature lessons].  
(Rural P1 teacher)

Learners who are 'often absent' on a Monday to help their parents trade at the local market would, however, hear and read stories in Rutooro only once a week. Literacy lessons were characterised by lively pair talk in Rutooro and learners – who could easily follow what the teacher said – were tasked with making predictions about a story from pictures before listening to and comprehending a three-line story and collaboratively writing a story. There were ample textbooks, but material and pedagogical inequities arose around lack of access to texts for further incidental reading: 'We have storybooks but we don't use them often' (Rural P1 teacher). The school had no library. Learners who had not attended ECDC were thereby further disadvantaged in the rural site by a lack of daily opportunities to listen or read stories in Rutooro, compounded by their absenteeism.

Although the English lesson in the rural P1 class included singing and the choral reading of a poem, it was characterised by a formal 'chalk and talk' approach close to that observed in the ECDC, with decontextualised choral practice of grammatical structures: 'Are you hurt? Yes I am, No I am not'. With 117 students, there was insufficient time for individual practice of English vocabulary and structures. Moreover, the teacher constantly codeswitched to Rutooro to maximise understanding:

When they fail to understand what I have told them [in English], I change to the language they understand better. (Rural P1 teacher)

Learners used Rutooro in the English class to discuss pictures in their textbook, as the teacher instructed, resulting overall in little communicative use of English. Overcrowding meant that learners who sat at the back were prone to being excluded from learning in either language. Yet teacher expectations for student achievement in both Rutooro and English remained high, with most going beyond the curricular benchmarks for P1 of reading four words:

Half of the class were able to read a story, others sentences and many others could [only] read words. (Rural P1 teacher)

The P3 teacher was a Rutooro-speaker in a class made up mostly of Rukiga-speakers. Creating several linguistic disjunctures, the SHRP textbooks were in Rukiga because the former class teacher had a Runyankore-Rukiga background and had requested SHRP training in Rukiga and brought back Rukiga textbooks – even while Rutooro is the designated area MoI. The new Rutooro-speaking teacher was valiantly ‘acquiring Rukiga as my second language’ so that he could use these Rukiga textbooks, helped out by his multilingual learners. He took advantage of the linguistic context and encouraged learners to tell stories in either Rukiga or Rutooro and to translate for one another. Oral stories are, he said, ‘transferred from one child to another which makes them fluent and leads to mastering the language’. By contrast, and as with the P1 teacher, in the English lesson a non-fiction text was read out in a stilted choral reading where the same teacher code-switched so much to explain content that it was sometimes difficult to determine whether he was teaching a local language or an English lesson. This teacher considered that for Rutooro, only 25 per cent met the P3 benchmark of reading stories – ‘the well-to-do ones with helpful parents’ – while 40 per cent of the class could only read words and the rest syllables – unsurprising given that more Rukiga was spoken, but thereby disadvantaging learners when the MoI was meant to be Rutooro. For 75 per cent of the class, thus, the necessary breakthrough to being able to read and comprehend continuous text would depend on learning to read in Rutooro for at least another year or more, with the right textbooks.

In P4, the rural teacher found himself in an untenable situation. Although it was the middle of the academic year and a gradual shift to English-only is encouraged, teaching in and of local language ended as the teacher adhered to the letter of the language policy: ‘I know it’s not allowed when you are teaching in English to teach in your mother language’ but was acutely aware that his learners could not grasp the higher demands of English that came with the now classified subject-based upper primary school curriculum. Disjunctures abounded as a result: learners chorused each line of a lengthy traditional Ugandan story in English following the teacher’s uncertain rendition, with no code-switching, hampered by insufficient numbers of texts and a notable absence of student talk in any language. The P4 teacher estimated that for his class of 49 learners, English levels at that mid-year point were low: ‘Not all can read a story but some 35 of the learners can read (words)’. When tested, however, the three assessed learners in the rural school read well in both Rutooro and English. Their previous P3 teacher had been excellent, on a par with the P1 teacher observed in this study, evidently building foundations for P4. Significantly, teachers also set regular homework with textbooks sent home when possible, and learners were supported by family/community members, building that second site of acquisition available in the home and community spaces because of the linguistic synergies between home and school.

Teachers in the rural sites were uncertain of their own proficiency in teaching English and this, compounded by learners’ lack of exposure to English in the home in the rural areas, led to greater code switching in the English subject lessons up until P4. This meant that learners heard more Rutooro and Rukiga than English – albeit in constrained, illegitimate ways, and with much interference from English.

### ***Learning to read in the urban primary schools across P1, P3 and P4***

In the urban context, learners had separate teachers for Rutooro and English, affording time, space and status for local language as the MoI in a majority-speaking Rutooro area.

The urban P1 Rutooro lesson was lively and it too followed the SHRP curriculum. Here, independent reading of Rutooro texts was facilitated by the school having a library and ‘many, many storybooks’. Learners read together from manila charts in the Rutooro language corner at break and lunchtimes, and teachers also told them more traditional stories, rhymes and riddles. This created synergy for all with the home space, and continuity for those who had attended the urban ECDC, with support for those who had not.

In the P1 English lesson, the multilingual teacher did not code switch but used English-only in a rich language approach with songs, accompanying actions, pictures, group work, syllabic beating of words, and the reading out of a poem in English on a chart, as if a lesson in the vernacular. Teacher expectations of learner achievement were high: the P1 Rutooro teacher said, ‘many learners will be able to read stories for themselves’ by the end of the year, surpassing expected curriculum benchmarks for P1. For those who were not reaching those levels, teachers carefully monitored individuals, moving easily round uncrowded classrooms, and assessed learners grouped by ability.

Learning in Rutooro in P3 was characterised by energetic pair and group discussions linked to children’s home life – for example ‘*Kakuba niwe bahaire enkoko waakukozireki?*’ (If you were given chickens to look after, what would you have done?), recognising learners’ knowledge and encouraging meaningful talk. The teacher reported that 80 per cent of learners could read in Rutooro. The P3 English-only class – taught by a different teacher – similarly involved much language production around a lively short text on beekeeping. The productive pedagogical approaches to learning in both Rutooro and English, while monolingual, enacted Cummins’ interdependence theory, L1 supporting L2 in what Guzula, McKinney, and Tyler (2016) call *linguaging-for-learning*.

By P4, however, there was a sudden departure, a disjuncture, from these lively pedagogies as English as a high status language kicked in and formal teaching of Rutooro stopped, as it had in the rural school, in the middle of the school year, and despite the P4 SHRP training and teaching materials. Urban parents would only pay for books in examinable subjects – English or Maths – and Rutooro lessons were cancelled for weeks at a time to prioritise monthly tests in English. There was a ‘backslide in reading in local language’, as the urban P4 teacher acknowledged, and Rutooro was quietly disbanded as a subject. The English P4 class teacher resorted to codeswitching and translation, time-consuming strategies not previously observed in this school, but common in English-medium classes (Milligan 2020) as the teacher sought to get learners to understand the more complex English vocabulary.

Translanguaging was however also used in this P4 class to facilitate fluency and understanding, building on learners’ foundational English and acted as a cohesive in their transition to English. Learners responded to questions the teacher posed in English: ‘What does ‘excitement’ mean?’ by answering in Rutooro – ‘*Kusemererwa okuhinguraine*’ (excessive happiness). Even so, learners’ comprehension in both languages was curtailed by linguistic fragmentation. The teacher hoped that ‘by the third term of P4 they will be okay’, an assertion that was undermined by her reckoning that only 100/170 would reach the benchmarks for English.

## Discussion and conclusion

From a multilingual home and community linguistic space where translanguaging happens as a matter of course, any synergies with educational settings proffer advantages. We found that linguistic capital accumulated over time in notable ways: when a child attends ECDC; when a child regularly listens to songs and stories in local language at ECDC; where several local languages are used fluidly and along a continuum that includes translation, codeswitching and most effectively translanguaging to support cross-linguistic transfer (De Galbert 2020); where learners produce as well as reproduce languages; where learners talk to one another; where school structures encourage incidental reading in local language; and where teachers closely monitor understanding. Such learners, found mostly in the urban site, appear to read age-appropriately, even in large classrooms. By the end of P3, many could read short stories in Rutooro and had a stronger basis as they transitioned to

English. Learners who had fewer linguistic advantages, typically in the rural sites, nevertheless made progress in reading Rutooro because of the linguistic synergies. By P3 all could read syllables and words and 25 per cent could read short stories according to their teacher. That leaves, however, 75 per cent who cannot read short stories in their own or a familiar language.

Disjunctures arose where the public and school linguistic environment was disrupted by the language policy and its assumptions that English was a familiar language for teachers and students. At the rural ECDC, for example, English was used as MoI in apparent disregard of the language policy, yet the teacher's own English was not proficient and she translated continually to Rutooro. Teachers in the rural school faced greater problems in teaching English, which is not commonly heard locally. This led to constant codeswitching, and less exposure to English while navigating around the tensions caused by Rukiga not formally being the MoI. Disjunctures increased between the home, public and school spaces from P4 in both sites as teachers negotiated the realities of the language policy and its abrupt bracketing off of Rutooro. In the rural site this led to default monolingualism in English, with silent classes. In the urban site, the teacher translated, codeswitched and translanguaged with learners who had a better understanding of both Rutooro and English, but not at the proficiency level where they could afford to drop their local language; and without the linguistic support that exists for local language at home.

Uganda's language policy and early childhood curricula encourage the use of the vernacular and its literature, yet at the same time devalue and rapidly displace them by early adoption of English as the MoI. This is policy-driven epistemic injustice that deprives young learners of the opportunity to fully develop reading and comprehension of continuous text in their local language(s) in school for the 6–8 years needed, amounting to accumulated cognitive wastage (Alidou et al. 2006; Milligan 2020). Teachers, struggling with asymmetrical community language contexts, must use English as MoI even as they know most of their learners do not understand them – a 'normalisation of the absurd' (Thiong'o 1986, 2) where, in the name of national unity, teachers are forced to accept divisions created by the ex-colonisers' language spoken by a low percentage of the population. African languages are constructed as 'inherently divisive' (*ibid*), while homes and communities are denied the linguistic advantages of local language that they can offer. This structural violence plays out in the real-life setting of schools as our data has captured and the linguistic and material inequities between rural and urban contributes to large numbers of dropouts in the rural site by P4. Bearing in mind that 76.8 per cent of the population live in rural areas, (UIS/UNESCO 2017), the rural site here represents the reality of educational aspirations for a majority of learners.

Our empirical findings suggest that most learners are not literate in local languages *or* English by P4, taking on board teachers' estimates of student proficiency levels, lesson observations, national examination data and our glimpses of individual student attainment. We conclude that a shift to a late-exit local language policy, with English becoming MoI by P6 (or P5 at the earliest) would be a more equitable language policy, one that better reflected the linguistic ecology children live and learn in. Within such a policy, children would benefit from the rich oral and written input needed to attain local language literacy in tandem with a longer time in which to strengthen their oral and written English as MoI. Even when English becomes MoI, the lively teaching of reading in local languages could continue unabated as a taught (and tested) curriculum subject rather than disbanded, right up to P7 and beyond into secondary school, maximising the opportunity for teachers to extend those good reading pedagogies found in this study. If English must be retained as early MoI for political reasons, the more fluid social practice of translanguaging between Rutooro, Rukiga and English should be encouraged unambiguously in the language policy as legitimate expressions of the interdependence model, and as a cohesive that reflects the multilingual ecology of Ugandan classrooms. This would facilitate transition to English, prioritising meaning-making and granting teachers the agency to be creative and flexible in their language use (Nakayiza 2013; Nankindu 2015; Makalela 2016; Adamson 2020).

Shifting to a later-exit model would prevent the disjunctures of languages and practices, and distortions necessary for teachers to comply with the language policy on which we have reported here

(see also Abiria, Early, and Kendrick 2013) and serve to free the vernacular and its literature from the infantilising bracket of the early-exit policy. Later-exit supports the advantageous synergies we found between home, community, ECDC and P3 when African languages commonly used in public spaces are used for learning. This would also support the cultural work of teachers as articulated by parents in this study. With nurseries and schools closed in Uganda now for nearly two years because of the global pandemic, young children will need all the support they can to catch up in their initial reading. This includes learning materials in local language and ready access to well-resourced school libraries. Recognising the linguistic ecologies of home and community as a second site of socially situated literacy acquisition responds to the call of extending the ‘idea of the local’ (Adejunmobi 2004; Namazzi and Kendrick 2014). Full mastery of local language, involving more sophisticated vocabulary acquisition and comprehension of more complex texts, returns the value of literature written in these languages, and brings their use into the dynamic multilingual present that exists everywhere beyond the walls of the school.

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