

THE BENEFITS OF MULTILINGUALISM IN EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The article gives a brief analytical survey of multilingualism practices, its consequences, its benefits in education and discussions on the appropriate ways towards its achievement in education. Multilingualism refers to speaking more than one language competence. Generally there are both the official and unofficial multilingualism practices. A brief survey on multilingualism practices indicates that Canada, Belgium and Switzerland are officially declared multilingual countries. Multilingualism exhibits both the political and the linguistic consequences. The linguistic consequences include the development of a lingua franca, creation of mixed languages within a linguistic milieu, enhances cross cultural communication strategies and cross cultural communication skills. Benefits of multilingualism practices in education include the creation and appreciation of cultural awareness, adds academic and educational value, enhances creativity, adjustment in society and appreciation of local languages.*

Key words: *Language, Benefits, Multilingualism, Bilingualism.*

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1. Introduction

Humans need an organized medium of communication in any given social set up. This medium is normally referred to as language. Though it appears difficult to clearly define the term language due to its social complexity, it is generally agreed amongst linguistic intelligentsia that it is a system of symbols designed for the purposes of communication. This system involves a collection of entities organized into a whole and arranged in such a way that they work together to achieve a particular function¹. Language as a medium of communication amongst humans possesses numerous attributes such as being governed by rules, is a system and performs such functions as giving information, expressing feelings and emotions, establishing rapport, exercising authority and an identity marker². As humans use more than one language, then terminologies such as bilingualism, trilingualism and multilingualism arise.

The term multilingualism which is the focus of this article is derived from two Latin words namely “multi” that means many and “lingua” that means language [3]. Thus multilingualism is referred to as the ability of a speaker to express himself or herself in several languages with equal and native like proficiency³. However, it has been realised in both the written and verbal communicative practices that proficiency in one language usually tends to dominate in a multilingual set up as compared to the others. Multilingualism can also be regarded as the co-existence of several languages within a society. Sometimes multilingualism is used interchangeably with bilingualism that refers to the ability to speak two languages with native like proficiency. Multilingualism is considered in this article as an inclusive terminology comprising bilingualism (ability to speak two languages proficiently), trilingualism (ability to speak three languages) and there is also instances whereby one speaker has the ability to speak even more than three languages. Since the prefix ‘multi’ refers to more than one, both bilingualism and trilingualism will therefore technically refer to more than one language. As we use several languages, we become multilingual.

Any given country or society is generally considered as a multilingual one if its members or citizens are multilingual. The multilingual citizens on many occasions tend to show identifiable full range of communicative competence in several languages in place. However, there is a rare perfect multilingualism in practice. The rare perfect practice occurs because even if we acquire both or several languages in place, there is always a notable tendency that one language will always dominate over the others which are considered subordinates.

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Objectives

The paper relied on the following four main objectives: to briefly survey multilingualism practices, discuss general consequences of multilingualism practices, elucidate some key benefits of multilingualism practices in education, and to discuss the way forward towards the achievement of multilingualism practices in education.

Methods

The paper relied on a survey design made by countries practicing multilingualism in general. The education referred to in this article is not only the formal one but also the informal one. The difference is just the procedure of disseminating knowledge and skills, and the place where teaching and learning are undertaken. Purposive sampling technique was applied in identifying countries that tend to practice multilingualism in education in different parts of the world. Benefits of multilingualism practices in education were realized by relying on text analysis of the written materials on education and psychology. Findings are descriptively presented in a continuous manner.

Results

This section is structured into four broad thematic areas: firstly, the general survey of multilingualism practices in different parts of the world. Secondly, explanations of the general consequences of multilingualism practices. Thirdly, discussions on notable benefits of multilingualism practices in the educational circles. Fourthly, discussions on way forward towards the achievement of multilingualism in education.

Survey of Multilingualism Practices Multilingualism practice manifests itself in the world at large. However, the general state of multilingualism in many societies and countries tend to be either official or unofficial. The official multilingualism is normally overtly enshrined in the country's constitution and practically applied in among others the education sector functions, national and international official engagements. The education sector functions include teaching and learning in primary, secondary and also tertiary institutions. Official engagements involve parliamentary proceedings, judicial activities, local and also international conferences among others. The unofficial multilingualism is not necessarily and clearly entrenched in the country's constitution. However, this trend is generally unavoidably practised amongst close or neighbouring ethnic communities as they interact amongst themselves during their daily activities such as trade and commerce, games and sports and the religious functions. This is happening when the two communities meet during activities such as sports, trade, politicking and even religious matters.

A country with a multilingual status generally referred to as a multilingual society normally has very clearly designed framework that is basically supported by an Act⁴. The Act is normally firstly crafted as a Bill to be discussed in parliament. Thereafter, if the Bill is passed into law, it becomes an Act entrenched in the country's constitution thus disseminated to the populace for consumption through various institutions. For instance, official multilingualism practice supported by an Act is manifested in Switzerland, Canada and Belgium among others. Africa has a mixed situation of multilingualism practices. Whereas some countries are officially multilingual, others are generally unofficial.

Consequences of Multilingualism The consequences of multilingualism are numerous ranging from linguistic and socio-political. Linguistic consequences of multilingualism include among others the creation and growth of lingua franca that normally develops because of the need for cross group communication. Multilingualism practice creates the development of mixed languages mainly due to intense language contact. As a result speakers therefore tend to involve a mixture of languages during verbal communication. This contact may also result into the creation of slangs. These slangs are generally caused by urbanization, migrant labour and also industrialization. Multilingualism practice generally develops cross linguistic communication

strategies like code switching and code mixing. When people switch from one language used at homes to the other outside the home environment then code switching occurs. This is witnessed in countries like India where switching is witnessed between English, Hindu/Urdu, Bengali and Tamil. Generally where bilingualism or multilingualism exists, speakers normally tend to use these languages alternately as commonly witnessed in Belgium, Switzerland and China. Multilingualism creates an aspect of diglossia whereby when there are two official languages, there is always one language that tends to dominate the other which is generally referred to as subordinate. This happens when viewed from a functional point.

Multilingualism practice tends to create the development and general acquisition of cross-cultural communication skills. In this regard people tend to learn different skills of the languages in place especially speaking, reading and even writing. These cross-cultural communication skills enable one to gain both the communicative and discourse competencies. Besides the linguistic consequences, there is also a political consequence that relies on the economic and political order of the society. This in the long run creates the majority and minority languages. Some of the majority languages become more powerful than others.

Benefits of Multilingualism Before discussing benefits of multilingualism in education, I have found it necessary to give a glimpse of how many people speak more than one language. It is estimated that over a billion people in the world speak more than one language fluently. However, with the increased population of people in the world the number of bilinguals may be currently twofold. This increased number of speakers is probably attributed to the regionalism and internationalism principles that are now embraced by many countries especially in the field of trade and commerce, innovation and also the technological advancements. These principles call for the speakers to be proficient in the working languages to effectuate communication. Languages namely Chinese, English, Russian, Spanish, Hindu, Portuguese, Bengali, German, Japanese, Arabic, Urdu, French, Malay-Bahasa, Italian, Teluga and Tamil are generally spoken each by approximately 50 million people as first languages.⁵ These languages tend to be official in many countries in the world thus contributing to official multilingualism practices.

The paper considers discussing the benefits of practicing multilingualism in the education sector not only in the formal education in learning institutions alone but also informal circumstances probably at homes. Therefore, some major benefits of multilingualism in education whether formal or informal include the following: Knowledge of more than two languages allows us to communicate with many people in both personal and professional contexts. This is owing to the fact that the vast amount of knowledge that people possess is often only effectively accessible through particular languages whether official or unofficial. This is clearly manifested in proven situations whereby knowing an indigenous language is believed to provide an access to a vast reservoir of wisdom, expertise, knowledge and skills contained in the bodies of speakers of the languages concerned. Therefore multilingualism is a big resource. When one knows the official language and perfectly speaks the indigenous languages then the person will be able to synthesize knowledge and express it accordingly. It is therefore necessary to include indigenous languages in education so as to realise the benefits of synthesizing and clearly expressing knowledge. Other scholars like⁶ argue that anybody who knows only one language is generally not different from an animal that is restricted in communication. Thus a monolingual can best be described as a restricted animal with a barrier in communication referred to as ‘fixity of reference’. This means that animals have messages connected with just one thing in the real world like a growl to an enemy, a particular scent to an attraction to mate and a cluck to a summon to a brood of ducks. Speaking one language can also be equated to a holophrastic stage of language development. This means that a monolingual can be regarded as one who is still in the process of language acquisition and development and should learn other languages to effectuate multi-communication. Thus multilingualism opens doors for quicker and easy communication. To remove the notion of ‘fixity

of reference’, entrenching multilingualism in education will of course enable one to avoid restrictions in communication thus enabling him to move to another stage of communication.

Multilingualism practices enhance intellectual flexibility and creativity. Recent studies have indicated that children who grow up in a supportive environment speaking more than one language from an early age are more perceptive and intellectually flexible than those who speak one language. By using the ‘double first language acquisition’ model as indicated by children with parents constantly speaking different languages grow up being equally fluent and comfortable with the two home languages and can even learn a third and fourth language. Though this research focussed on the home contexts, this is also practical in the classroom contexts whereby students who are exposed to many languages will tend to be intellectually flexible. Enhancement of intellectual flexibility is corroborated by various viable findings. While studying extensively on multilingualism practices, a speech and language therapist Dr. Elsie Naude from Pretoria realised that when parents encourage children to acquire additional languages then they are also investing in the child intellectually. Thus, many children who are fluent in more than one language are superior lateral thinkers, have a greater social adaptability, their thinking and reasoning skills are better, and their cognitive abilities are also greater. A case in point is explained by that children who speak at least two languages do better in school than those who speak one language. Recent research done by University of London Institute of Education (ULIE) concerning studies on bilingualism proved that when you speak two languages you do better in school ⁷

Multilingualism provides an insight into the understanding of different cultures and experiences hence a multilingual becomes multicultural in nature. Since languages don’t operate in a vacuum, culture and society play a key role in its existence. This is because language is a sociolinguistic, an ethno linguistic and a psycholinguistic issue. Thus language relies on society, culture and mind. In this regard, multilingualism enhances an automatic understanding and appreciation of cultural values of the societies that are contained in the concerned languages. The experiences gained from learning different languages automatically tend to change the attitudes, skills, beliefs of the people, society and create an expansion of world view. All these attributes are formally taught in classroom and informally in the daily communication outside classroom. Multilingualism provides a competitive edge in today’s job market. Besides the academic and professional credentials, employers also look for fluency in the desired languages as an added advantage. Therefore, being a multilingual is a plus to any job seeker in this millennium. This can only be realised if multilingualism is entrenched in the learning curriculum. A clear survey by the American Council on Education (ACE) realized that it is somewhat important to speak another language so as to compete successfully in the global economy. In this regard development of many language skills therefore helps in economic adjustments. For example, in Israel and Netherlands, knowledge of either Hebrew or Dutch respectively tends to limit his or her educational and employment opportunities ⁸. In Canada, there is a wage premium for the bilinguals. In 1981 the Quebec residents who could speak only one language had 1.6% lower earnings than those who are English-French bilinguals. Multilingualism is also a form of human capital. This is because skills in multilingualism are created at a cost (time of the person, teachers and parents in enhancing the language skills, purchasing inputs and other school supplies). Language skills are productive especially in the individual’s role as a consumer and in the role as a producer. Those deficient in language skills find it very costly. It is therefore beneficial to have many languages entrenched in an education system in order to get a solid human capital. Multilingualism helps in national unity especially if people learn national languages besides their indigenous languages and lingua franca. In the process, the people concerned will automatically embrace the value of togetherness.

For this to be fruitful, multilingualism in education calls for the involvement of language education communication skills which is an essential tool for the development of the learner’s speaking and writing abilities. Application of communicative language teaching focusing on linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, socio-cultural, social and strategic competences and drama

can help in the achievement of multilingualism in education. These can be realised by continuous use of these competences in education. Furthermore, grammar translation, direct method (teaching using the target language), reading method, use of audio lingual and audiovisual approaches can also be applied in teaching languages in a multilingual set up Encouraging the use of indigenous languages in education besides the national and official languages enhances multilingualism. This fact has been clearly stated in the UNESCO report of 1953 that education is somewhat most effective through mother tongue instructions This is happening because speech communities already have the communicative competence and also assigned appropriately various lexemes to the objects in their physical and cultural milieu. Thus, learning a different language may not be difficult but will always be supported by the knowledge gained from the first language. Making dictionaries and publishing of grammar and story books in any language are the fastest ways of spurring language growth and preservation. There is also need to do the same using the other native languages. In order to enhance multilingualism in education, foreign languages should be introduced as common courses and or medium of instruction for teaching specialised disciplines. It is worth noting that Western University College of Science and Technology currently referred to as Masinde Muliro in Kenya has realized the importance of involving other foreign languages in its proposed good programmes. The programmes include for example the study of Japanese language for engineers, French for business studies and German for tourism This can be replicated as a viable step in enhancing official multilingualism in education. Besides, acquiring knowledge and skills in these programmes, learners will be able to gain proficiency in these languages. Developing and training both foreign and indigenous language teachers are very instrumental steps to help in the achievement of multilingualism practices in education. This can be achieved by training more teachers both indigenous and foreign languages in the training institutions. There should also be an establishment of translation bodies with linguistic experts to help in the translation of both indigenous and foreign languages. This can also be used to encourage the establishment of bodies like institute of language research and language councils to enhance multilingualism practices in education.

Conclusion

When foreign and indigenous languages are included in the multilingualism practices in education, then we should always try to avoid imposing these languages to the people. A keen measure and clear framework should be taken into account because imposing languages to people is dangerous and may cause tensions amongst different ethnic and or speech communities Furthermore, as you impose a lingua franca and or foreign languages to people without developing also the indigenous languages then this may lead to language death. There are more than 3,000 languages spoken in the world today that are at the point of dying and some are already extinct Causes of language death may include among others the following factors: imposition of languages on the others, language colonialism, foreign language dictatorship and assimilation of language. The revival of these dying languages can be done by the incorporation of multilingualism practices in education and the production of both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries To put it In a nut shell, depending on the composition of the society, multilingualism practice in education should embrace the indigenous, national, official and foreign languages as equal partners in the language policy development and education.

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