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**DECOLONIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN AFRICAN
SOCIETIES: CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION**

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Decolonizing Global Hegemonies in Africa and the African Diaspora

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Abstract

A discussion on knowledge independence or knowledge-production decolonization with the assumption that an epistemological base for knowledge creation exists in most African societies by drawing from indigenous praxis which includes language and history.

The background to this study highlighted the usage of colonial languages by post-colonial African Societies as the language of knowledge transfer in schools and educational institutions, to the neglect of the mother tongue and local language. This prevents an intellectual dislocation that negatively affects the identity, creativity, and works of learners.

The two major theories at the base of this paper are postcolonial theory and Lev Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development. A form of qualitative research method called Meta-synthesis was used to collate, isolate and analyze major themes extracted from the Literature.

Analysis of findings shows: that a positive relationship exists between competence in the mother tongue and ease of learning in school; that an epistemological base exists in African societies and can form the foundation of mother tongue education.



Keywords

African Studies, Decolonization of African Education, Interdependence Hypothesis, Mother Tongue Education, Language of Instruction, Post-Colonial Theory, Knowledge Creation, Bilingual Education, Linguistic Imperialism, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

Introduction: Colonization, Postcolonial Theory and Decolonization

Post-Colonial African societies continue to function with the cultural and educational framework inherited from colonialists more than fifty years ago. There has been a break in this continuity since the early 2000s or the beginning of the 21st Century, when Nigerian Federal Universities introduced, as a universal prerequisite, courses that relate to pre-colonial African history.

The goal of this curriculum innovation, as explained at the time by the scholarly authorities, was to foster a more African identity in graduates which will support them in creating and using knowledge that is more African in essence (Maina, 2003). Decades since this began, it turns out that curriculum innovation is just one aspect of knowledge-creation decolonization.

This cultural trend in education has expanded towards other factors such as the language of instruction (Adebisi, 2016). We now have educational pilot projects across Africa (in Kenya, Piper et al 2016; and in Cameroon, Ramachandran, 2018) that are using local or mother tongue as the language of instruction in educational systems instead of the public European or foreign languages that have been used until now. The randomized control trial by Piper et al (2016) is evaluated in this paper.



In this paper, we are concerned with the decolonization of Africa using Postcolonial Theory. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, by (Cain, 2013), Linda Tuhiwai Smith defines decolonization as “a social and political process aimed at undoing the multifaceted impacts of the colonial project and re-establishing strong contemporary indigenous nations and institutions based on traditional values, philosophies and knowledge”.

This has been an ongoing process since African nations attained political independence in the second half of the last century. It is a multi-faceted process that includes the political, religious, art, and education in and of Africa.

Here, we restrict our interest in decolonization to African Education. Further in this paper, we outline the work and findings of researchers who have looked at one or some of our research questions. Following is an outline of the major contributors to the background of this study.

Cummins (1979) is one of the earliest researchers on this topic in the literature. The major thesis of his work is that children find it easier to learn a second language only after mastering their own first language or mother tongue.

This is relevant because most African children, at the age when they begin formal education, are still struggling to gain mastery of their own first language or mother tongue. According to Cummins (1979), this will result in poor educational outcomes for African children, who will end up average in the mastery of both languages.



Background

Present in the literature is a body of work on this subject by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), who term the dominance of foreign languages in African education and society as *'linguistic imperialism'*.

Benson (2004), in a background paper published by a UNESCO initiative, argued for formal biliteracy for minority children who have to experience education in a language other than their mother tongue. She observed the ease with which students who are literally bilingual can learn and transfer concepts from one language to the other. Benson (2004) insisted this is more effective than memorization or rote learning.

Oluwole (2016) in a set of video interviews titled 'Oro Isiti' laid emphasis on the mother tongue as the preferred language of instruction. She argued that certain localized experiences and concepts have no equivalent translation into English for example. She also argued that learning, when done in a foreign language, will therefore be incomplete, foreign to learners, and not useful for knowledge creation.

We examined ideas by Chumbow (2009) and Adebisi (2016) and evaluated a randomized control pilot project in Kenya carried out by Piper et al (2016), who sought to provide qualitative evidence found in the medium-scale implementation of Mother Tongue Education in Kenya. Piper recommends that similar experimental programs should be conducted on a larger scale; and that corresponding policy challenges to implementation be addressed by the relevant Government agencies in Kenya.





Research Questions

We looked at the questions behind these pilot projects and checked if they are addressed in the literature. The Research Questions that guided our study included the following:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between the language of instruction and ease of learning for students?

RQ2: Does literacy improve for students when the mother tongue or local language is used for instruction instead of a foreign public language?

RQ3: Does an epistemological or indigenous knowledge base exist from which schools in Africa can draw their cultural framework?

RQ4: Does using the mother tongue as instructional language in schools support knowledge creation and decolonization in African societies?

Decolonizing African Education

Spivak (2007), Rodney (2012), Wright et al (2007)

Spivak (2007), in describing the impact of colonialism on Africa, referred to it as 'epistemic violence' which has silenced the 'colonial subjects' of Africa by appropriating and replacing their Education systems with Eurocentric ones.

Rodney (2012) further noted the introduction and the use of written texts and non-lyrical European languages in colonial education. These had the result of splitting the African Character into two; one, that is indigenous and at home with inherited genetics, epistemology, and practices, and two, another that is imposed and calculated, inorganic and assimilated into, with very little interaction between both.

In this type of colonial education, Rodney identified a focus on English, French, and Portuguese as languages of instruction and communication with a parallel erasure of African Languages and practices. Decolonizing African education will mean a reversal of this process, a form of 'epistemic restoration' if we look at it from Spivak's point of view.

Wright et al (2007) concluded that the main objective of decolonizing African education should be to critically engage with and include African Knowledge (both pre-colonial and post-colonial) in formal schooling while refusing to affix the label of inferiority to 'other' systems of knowledge as has been the case until now. Decolonization of education, knowledge, and thought implies that there are several different ways of knowing and that these ways, including indigenous ones, are valid.



Language and Decolonizing African Education

Brock-Utne (2000) discovered that the failure of African countries to achieve development targets can be traced to the colonial era as most of these States continue to use English, French, and Portuguese as the language of instruction in Schools. Arnove (2003) insists that African intellectuals need to rethink the use of English, a language introduced by colonization, as the medium of instruction in African schools. Further, Geo-Jaja and Azaiki (2010) have shed more light on the persistent danger of not recognizing indigenous languages in schools in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

This is contrary to a previous finding by Geo-Jaja (2006) that education and its curriculum if they are to be effective, should be grounded in the indigenous knowledge and language of the people whom it serves. This also explains why Fafunwa (1990) condemned colonization for allowing 'linguistic domination' to take place in Africa, creating various 'linguistic blocks' such as Francophone, Anglophone, and Lusophone Africa. He noted very clearly that except for Kenya, Somalia, and Tanzania, African countries are yet to realize that literacy does not mean being fluent in writing or oral in a Western language.

The subject of foreign languages in African education in relation to decolonization continues to be investigated. Several African scholars define a reformed African education that includes rather than excludes indigenous knowledge. Indeed, they imagine local African languages being used as the medium of instruction in schools, just as you have it in Western Europe and Asia, for example. In this sense, Prah (2001) reminded us that no society in the world has developed on the strength of a borrowed or colonial language. In the form of a rhetorical question, Mazrui (1986) inquired to know if any country achieved first-rank economic development with the overwhelming use of foreign languages for its discourse on growth and development.

The common underlying thread in literature is that the decolonization of African education is also the decolonization of the language of instruction, a replacement of the colonial language with an Indigenous one.



Education as Knowledge Creation (Oluwole, 2016)

The main goal of education is to examine, critique, **create and use new Knowledge to meet the needs of people and the host Society.** Oluwole (2016) defined education as the comprehensive process in which traditions, customs, and indigenous knowledge of a people are systematically transmitted from one generation to another.

There are other definitions of education in literature. However, for the intent and purpose of this paper, we will defer to Oluwole's definition of education. In addition, we will consider education and knowledge creation to be the same thing in practice. So, hereon, both terms will be used interchangeably.

It can be argued that much of the knowledge creation that occurs in the schooling system does take place at the post-graduate or Ph.D. level. Such an argument will mean restricting the focus of our paper to the decolonization of language in education at that stage of learning. Nonetheless, for our study, we assumed that knowledge-creation, just like literacy, occurs at all stages of education; and that the learning process is innately creative and innovative.



Literacy and Language, (Cummins, 1979)

James Cummins is one of the earliest researchers whose work focuses on the relationship between the knowledge-creation process (or literacy) and language, in particular the home language or L1. He conducted his research with bilingual children who are often minority children immersed in a school experience and society that uses a language of instruction other than their own home language. We highlight the overview, approach, findings, and suggestions from his study.

Cummings (1979) set out to investigate the reasons why a home-school language switch resulted in proficiency in learning outcomes for majority-language students and a deficiency in the same outcomes for minority-language students. In his work, the mother tongue or home language is referred to as L1 while the school language is L2. He identified three major factors affecting his research problem namely:

- 1) Linguistic factors
- 2) Sociocultural factors
- 3) School program factors: under linguistic factors, he referred to a 'linguistic-mismatch' hypothesis which was used in a 1953 UNESCO report to conclude that 'the best language to instruct a child in his or her own mother tongue'.

The original purpose of the UNESCO report was to determine the linguistic level and development in both the mother tongue and Swedish language of Finnish migrant children attending Swedish comprehensive schools. It was observed that attention was paid to the interdependence between skills in the mother tongue and Swedish. For example, the hypothesis that was tested proved that learners who have best preserved their mother tongue are also best in Swedish.

This hypothesis was strongly supported by the findings cited by Cummins who also discovered that Finnish migrant children had average levels of nonverbal intellectual ability and that their skills in both Finnish and Swedish were considerably below that of Finnish and Swedish expectations. Prior to this discovery, it was observed there was an extent to which the mother tongue was developed in each learner before their contact with Swedish students and was strongly related to how well Swedish was learned by the Finnish migrant students.

This UNESCO finding is consistent with the “developmental interdependence hypothesis” proposed by Cummins (1976), as one of two hypotheses that can be used to understand the relationship between linguistic development and cognition in bilingual children. The developmental interdependence hypothesis is the central thesis of Cummins’ work, and it states that bilingual children attain a level of competence in L2 based on the level of competence they already achieved in L1 prior to exposure to L2.

It has also been referred to as the ‘vernacular advantage’ by some authors, one of them being Modiano (1968). She, Modiano, found that Mexican-Indian children who were taught to read firstly in their home or vernacular language and then in Spanish scored higher on Spanish reading after three years than those children who learned to read only in Spanish.



Language of Instruction and Educational Quality, (Benson ,2004)

Decolonizing education in African societies has to do with removing all the colonial nature, properties, and intent of education as it was inherited from colonial powers. We are interested in how this decolonization (of education or knowledge-creation) relates to the language used for instruction in the schooling system in West and East African schools.

Benson studied a similar problem, and we include here a review of her work and findings. Benson established that language and communication are vital to educational quality. She wanted to see what changes occur in educational quality when the language of instruction is L1, the mother tongue rather than a full submersion in L2, a school language that differs completely from students' mother tongue and home language.

Her work drew extensively from our previously cited researcher, Cummins (1991, 1999), *the interdependency theory*, and the concept of *common underlying proficiency* whereby literacy skills and cognition in one language can be used to achieve literacy and cognition more quickly in another language.



Benson explained that many developing societies are characterized by individual as well as societal multilingualism but most follow a single foreign language as the language of instruction and not their mother tongue.

In contrast, mother tongue-based bilingual programs use the learner's first language, known as the L1, to teach early reading and writing skills along with academic content. She insisted that the second or foreign language, known as the L2, should be taught systematically so that learners can gradually transfer skills from the familiar language to the unfamiliar one.

Advantages that result from this system of instruction (competence in L1 before L2) include an understanding of sound-symbol or meaning-symbol correspondence. Students are able to learn L2 through communication rather than memorization. They are able to transfer linguistic and cognitive skills from L1 to L2 in this type of bilingual program or schooling, which is what she recommended.

These benefits to educational quality, she asserts, are based on two assumptions: one, that basic human needs have been met and two, that mother-tongue-based bilingual schooling can be properly implemented. She cites as an example the implementation of a pilot project in Nigeria where the Yoruba language was used as the mother tongue or L1 from primary 1 to 6 and gradually replaced with the English Language as L2 from primary 5 onwards.

The project reported an easier transition into L2 for the students involved with better transfer of skills in literacy, comprehension, reading, speaking, and the ability of students to grasp instruction content faster. Benson suggested that mother-tongue-based learning be implemented from small-scale to large scale through experimentation.



Decolonizing African Education and IHRL, Adebisi (2016)

At Independence, the leadership of African societies was placed in African hands. Adebisi noted that these were not just normal hands, but actually the hands of African elites who had been educated in colonial schools, and whose thoughts had been colored by colonial Education. In this colonial or Eurocentric education which continued to be the currency in post-colonial Africa, indigenous African knowledge was seen as pre-critical, pre-logical, and by nature inferior.

Later efforts in decolonization will spread to remove these vestiges of colonial influence. She cited, in this regard, the 'Rhodes Must Fall' decolonization movement in South Africa in 2016; and the decades-long drive by African intellectuals to make African education stand on an Afrocentric curriculum. However, there are limitations to this effort. One of them is the international investment in African education which is more concerned with the 'right to education' or access to the neglect of the right of Africans to their own education.

According to Adebisi (2016), this complex international education relationship between Africa and the world needed revisiting, with consideration given to African culture and indigeneity. Citing Sertima (1984) to illustrate the roots of Africa's education crisis in colonialism, Adebisi pointed to the solution to this crisis in post-colonial theory which can be used to deconstruct colonialism.

She agreed with Syrotinski (2007) that post-colonialism can heal the trauma of colonialism and create new narratives that contain more freedom and opportunity for all. This, however, is only possible if the decolonization of education is done in the context of International Human Rights Law (IHRL), and as suggested by wa Mutua (1994). In this sense, the subject of decolonizing African education is resolved by giving voice and value to African indigenous thought and knowledge.



Research Methods

We were concerned with isolating the relationship between knowledge-creation decolonization and language of instruction in Africa (West and East).

The two major theories underlying our research are:

1] post-colonial theory

2] Lev Vygotsky's theory of socio-cultural development.





Post Colonial Theory

The geographical context of Africa brings post-colonial theory into relevance. While Adebisi (2016) has defined post-colonial theory as the search for the truth about Africa by way of analyzing the consequences of colonialism on the colonized and proposing ways to correct negative influences and structures, Ahluwalia (2012) states that post-colonial theory is helpful in the total examination of society from the moment it is ruptured by colonialism until the present post-colonial period.

Birgit Brock-Utne and Babaci-Wilhite are examples of prominent authors who have used postcolonial theory as a lens to investigate problems in 21st-century Africa.

Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of cognitive development

The second theory that underpins our research is Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of cognitive development. In a sense, Vygotsky attributes cognitive development to the learner's culture. He states that social interaction plays an important role in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

This social interaction is between the Teacher and the Student and is influenced by variables such as local culture and language.

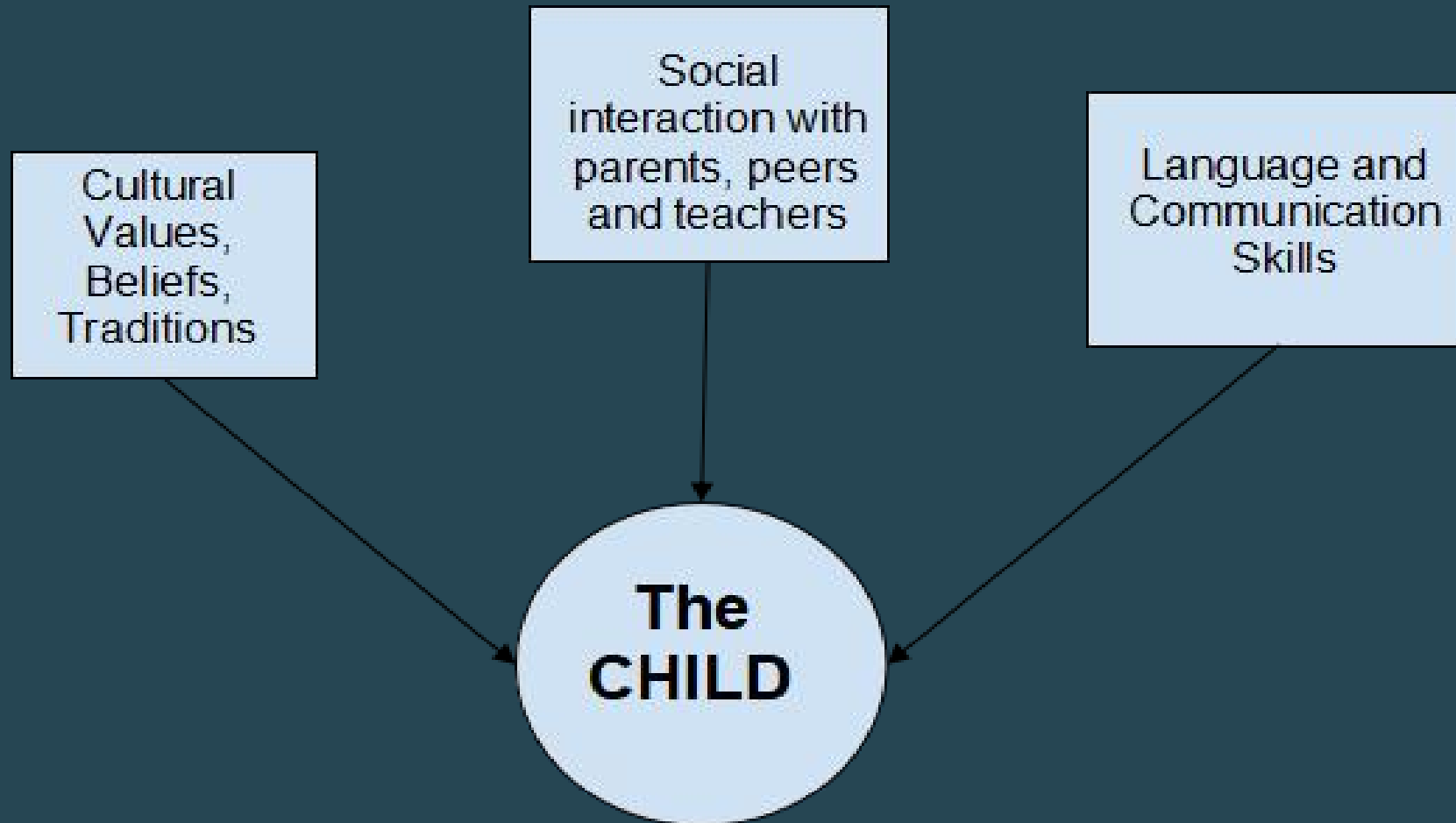
In fact, he places language front and center among factors that impact cognition which in later stages of school becomes knowledge-creation. Elliot (1994, p.41) cited Vygotsky's idea that "thought development is determined by language, for instance, by the linguistic tools of thought and by the socio-cultural experience of the child".

This implies that a child is more likely to learn better or have better cognitive development if the language of instruction is as close to the mother tongue as possible. His theory indicates that a relationship exists between the language of instruction and knowledge creation.

It also could mean that we can decolonize knowledge-creation or education by decolonizing the language of instruction from a foreign one to the mother tongue. The figure below depicts Vygotsky's model of learning, showing the factors that contribute to cognition in the child learner.



Fig 1: Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Model of Cognitive Development (Vygotsky, 1978)



Research Design

The figure below shows the research method (Meta-Analysis) and design for our Study. In short, we systematically reviewed a collection of studies and a randomized controlled trial related to our problem statement.

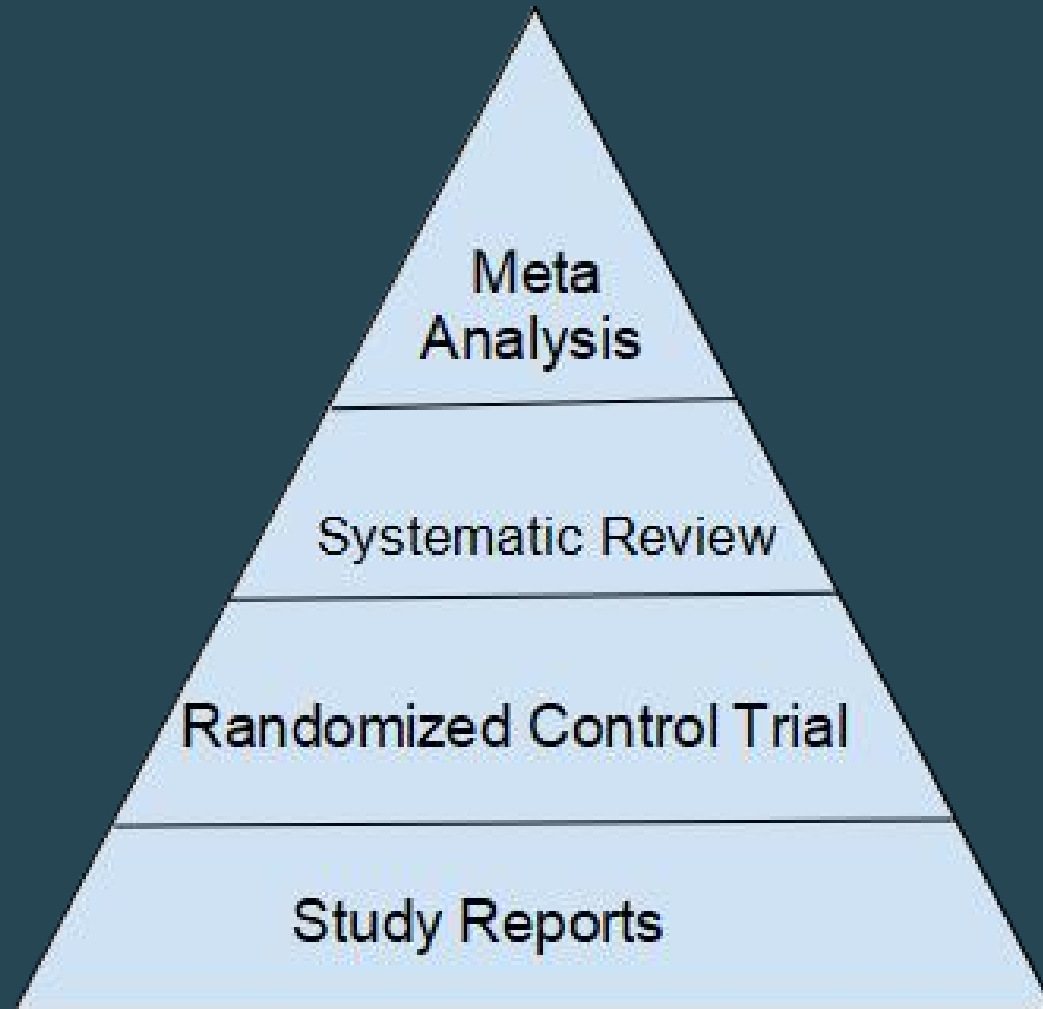
Then, we meta-analyzed their findings and overlapping recommendations, which we synthesized into our insights and recommendations.

The systematic review, as used in our study, has been defined by The Campbell Collaboration (2015) as one where transparent procedures are used in evaluating and synthesizing the findings of relevant research.

The procedures are clearly identified and outlined to enable understanding and replication of similar future research.



Fig. 2: Meta-Analysis research method (Campbell, 2015).





DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

RQ1: Is there a relationship between the language of instruction and ease of learning for students?

Benson directly showed that a relationship existed between the language of instruction used in school and the ease of learning of students.

A local language or mother tongue was more likely to put students at ease, increasing student confidence, and participation in classroom activities.

Oluwole agreed with this in her position remarks. While Cummins does not directly address this, he showed that students in submersion bilingual programs that ignored the home language of learners are more likely to experience frustration and difficulty with learning the concepts taught in schools.



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

RQ2: Does literacy improve for students when the mother tongue or local language is used for instruction instead of a foreign public language?

Benson showed that literacy and cognitive skills improved when the mother tongue is used for instruction instead of a public language.

She cited a Nigerian example of a pilot project where the Yoruba language was used as L1 from primary 1 to 6, and English language introduced in primary 5.

The result was better skills in literacy, comprehension, reading, speaking and ability of students to grasp instructional content faster.

Piper et al particularly found that reading outcomes of children in primary level is improved when they received instruction in their own Mother-Tongue.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

RQ3: Does an epistemological or indigenous knowledge base exist from which schools in Africa can draw their cultural framework?

Oluwole, in her position remarks, made it clear that pre-colonial African societies, such as the Yorubas in Nigeria, had a wealth of indigenous knowledge embedded in their language and oral tradition.

This formed the epistemological base and cultural bedrock of their pre-modern education and should serve the same purpose in the decolonized education of Africa where more place and relevance is given to the mother tongue as the medium of instruction and Africa's indigenous knowledge.

Cummins, Benson, and Modiano confirmed that mother tongues contain a rich base of knowledge that children later use to process learning and literacy in a foreign or school language.

Piper et al showed proof that there is enough cultural framework or epistemic base in African languages (for example in Kenya) that can sustain literacy and education at the primary level.



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

RQ4: Does using the mother tongue as instructional language in schools support knowledge creation

Chumbow established a direct link between using the mother tongue in the home and local districts (for education, commerce, and governance), and national development. Education at the local district level can be understood as knowledge-creation decolonization while national development can be switched with decolonization. However, more research is needed to show that national development according to Chumbow includes the decolonization of education.

Fafunwa as cited by Benson showed clearly that mother tongue education leads to literacy, reproduction, and the creation of new knowledge in that tongue.

Further, Adebisi argued that mother tongue education decolonized African education and Societies. Fafunwa, Benson, and Adebisi are all in agreement with Oluwole, who stated that **mother tongue education will revive indigenous knowledge and decolonize African educational systems in the process.**



Recommendation

Firstly, this has been a meta-analysis of the examined literature. For this reason, we clearly pointed out under ‘the limitations of this study that we were limited to the errors made in creating, collating, and processing the primary data. We, therefore, recommended that this study be carried out in the future as an empirical study with direct access to primary, real-time data.

That should offer more original insights into this problem. Secondly, the theoretical framework and model of Chumbow, can and should be further investigated. It has research potential, especially with respect to the relationship between indigenous languages and decolonization in Africa.

We want to encourage more researchers to further evaluate the model in the context of mother tongue education (at the private realm and local district) and decolonization (at the public realm level). Our analysis of the findings led us to offer the following recommendations



One, is that mother tongue education be implemented at the early childhood and primary level of education in Kenya and Nigeria. This is not as formidable a task as it might seem.

The challenges faced in such a project are already addressed by Benson in her citation of Fafunwa, as well as by Piper et al.

We are suggesting these two countries because both already have theoretical research and trial projects in this area.

Other countries that have not been represented adequately in the literature need to first focus on sponsoring academic research and trial projects on this topic.

This should give a clear picture of not just the nature of the relationship but also the cultural, policy, and political factors that influence implementation.



Two, we do not recommend completely removing English or French (or another colonial language) as languages of instruction.

Instead, we support the additive bilingualism of Cummins, as demonstrated by Fafunwa, where the children (at the primary level) firstly master their own mother tongue or local language from inception until primary 5, where English or French is then introduced to them.

Our findings show that this is best for their cognitive development and also, in this cultural context, to achieve indigeneity or decolonization in Africa.

It will also remove the fears of parents that their children will be linguistically irrelevant in a global economy conducted largely in English, French, Chinese, and Russian instead of in African languages.



Three, when we conducted our study at the obstacles to mother tongue education, we realized that they were more policy-oriented than research-oriented.

On this note, we want to suggest a more formal and developed awareness campaign aimed at educating stakeholders about implementation.

This will include relevant government agencies, school boards and districts, parents, and teachers in society. Teacher education, in particular, needs a lot of investment to this end.

We recognize that until recently, teacher training was done in foreign or public languages and with educational philosophies that ignore indigenous knowledge.

A related re-invention of teacher training is therefore needed. This will make it easier to educate parents and the new generation of learners in such a way that enables knowledge creation and decolonization.



Four, similar to the immediate last point made, we have discovered research-opportunity in the area of training teachers in Mother Tongue education.

There is very little work that has been done on this. We therefore encourage aspiring PhDs, peer - reviewed journals and research institutes to seize this opportunity to add to existing knowledge in the area of education.



Five, we realize that there is almost no literature on mother tongue education at the secondary and tertiary levels of education.

What exists is the study of a few African languages at the tertiary level. We also have, usually in Universities in Europe or America, African Studies departments.

What we want to finally recommend is new and further research on mother tongue education at the secondary and tertiary levels.

We also think it will be reasonable to mandate the learning of one African language in the African studies program.

Not only this but also most of the coursework of African Studies should be taught in at least one prerequisite African language as part of the curriculum.

This will fall under the International Human Rights Law (IHRL) in education that Adebisi referred to, where value and place are assigned to African indigenous knowledge anywhere, inside, or outside of Africa.




Conclusion

We set out to investigate the relationship between instruction in a mother tongue or local language and knowledge-creation decolonization in African societies. This is against the background of calls for the decolonization of Africa, which extends to education and educational systems, the major places where knowledge creation takes place on the continent.

Not that this trend in education research is a bandwagon, but it has achieved some level of popularity in the last two to three decades. Writers such as Benjamin Piper and Adebisi have recently drawn more international attention to this area of research. We wanted to explore what postcolonial theory will reveal in a post-colonial Africa as far as education was concerned.

Our meta-analysis reveals that more work needs to be done in African countries to uncover more theoretical relationships (in mother tongue education in Africa, policy development, and implementation) that can be tested in practice.

Beyond recommending areas of further research, we found that African societies possess an epistemological base in their own cultural framework and language. This was preserved in pre-colonial times using oral tradition, which relied extensively on communication by speaking and language.



Post-colonial Africa has committed ‘epistemic violence’ by replacing this indigenous knowledge base with a Western base that does not have the same framework. The result is an education system that has high literacy or availability but is not effective or of much use to African people because it is designed by and for others outside of their culture.

The reform of education in Africa must consist of restoring indigeneity. One way to do this is to make the mother tongue or local languages the medium of instruction in schools, particularly in the early childhood and primary level of education.

When this process expands to include secondary and tertiary levels of education, decolonization of knowledge creation in African societies is likely to show results in postgraduate research, industry, the economy, government, and transformed international relations.

Questions & Comments





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