

**LANGUAGE  
PLANNING  
IN  
EDUCATION**

Rubagumya (1990) states that in order for a language to function as a medium of instruction it should meet three criteria. First, it should be accepted by all concerned, parents, teachers, students and society. It should also be teachable to the required standard. Finally, the language should be used in at least some domains outside the educational system. On the other hand, Cook (1991) cites that parents sometimes decide to send their child to a certain school in which a specific language is the medium of instruction because they believe it to be the language of the majority or the elite.

However, language planning as defined in Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) is an attempt taken by someone to modify the linguistic behaviour of a certain group because of some reasons. In other words, there are certain factors that influence the decision of what language to be used as the medium of instruction. This paper is an effort to discuss the factors that determine the use of a certain language as a medium of instruction in a certain setting. Apart from the reasons given above by Rubagumya (1990) and Cook (1991) the factors in this paper fall into two main groups, national and individual factors.

Examples from different settings will be given to underpin the factors. The essay will also include the problems that coexist with the adaptation of a language to be the medium of instruction. In relation to the problems, the paper will conclude with some suggested ways to ameliorate or even for averting them.

### **National Factors**

To begin, language planning in the national domain is perceived as a political and administrative activity for solving the problems of the society. Consequently, the language chosen to be the medium of instruction should satisfy certain criteria identified as national factors. These include unity, neutrality, political power and modernity. The same factors can also decide on the national language of a society however, the focus here is their influence on choosing the medium of instruction.

### **Unity**

Having agreed that the medium of instruction should not create problems within the societal groups. Therefore the first national factor that influences the choice of a language to be the medium of instruction is unity. One of the language planning policies that have been used to achieve the purpose of unity is language shift. Bright (1992), as cited in Wiley (1996), defines language shift as “a gradual or sudden move from the use of one language to another” (p122). It can be explicitly planned or a gradual process within individuals or societies. In a community like Israel, where people of different origins and mother tongues live, getting people to speak a common language plays a great

role in achieving unity. People would feel more integrated when they can all speak the same language.

It has to be admitted that attitudes towards the presentation of mother tongues may change over time and after the minority groups become more integrated with the wider community. However, it is also important to stress that seeking unity should not result in abandoning all the other languages that are spoken by minority groups or even immigrants. In the United States, Arab immigrants, for example, tend to maintain their mother tongue and encourage their children to learn it. Language planning should not stand against that however it should encourage people to learn the common language because it will enable them to take part in the society. If the community of Israel is considered, English, French and Arabic are maintained in the education system because they are believed to be helpful in serving the nation's needs in the area (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997). In Singapore for example, the education system requires students to learn in English and study their mother tongues as compulsory subject. This enables them to be proficient in English, which is the language of commerce, technology and administration and their mother tongue, the language of their cultural heritage.

Another example is Ethiopia. After a long civil war, Ethiopian leaders have started to recognise and develop the living indigenous languages. The country has established nine linguistic regions in which specific languages are focussed. Nonetheless, Amharic remains functioning as the language that can enable people to communicate with each other. In the education system, the language of the region or the vernacular is used as the medium of instruction in the primary level and English is a taught subject only. In the secondary level English is the medium of instruction and Amharic is a taught subject. Finally English is the medium of instruction in the university level (Bloor and Tamrat 1996).

### **Neutrality**

In order for any language to achieve the goal of unity it has to avoid any conflict within the ethnic groups the society comprises. Hassan (1989) notes that in order for a language to achieve unity it has to be neutral. Therefore the neutrality of a language is a very important factor. Pennycook (1994) states, describing English, 'It is a neutral medium for the gaining of knowledge, a neutral medium for the inter-racial communication ...' (p247). For example, in Singapore English is the medium of instruction because it belongs to none of the ethnic Singaporean groups.

For a language to be neutral, it has to be accepted by all concerned. In other words, all the ethnic groups especially in multilingual societies should accept the neutral language. Therefore, planners should be very careful when planning the medium of instruction. The preference of one language on another can create divisiveness. Wiley (1996) reports

Fishman observing that 'languages cannot be considered until they are freed from the suspicion of divisiveness and incompatibility with progress, modernity and efficiency' (p 123).

### **Political Power**

In some settings the decision of choosing a language to function as the medium of instruction is purely political. The language might be predominantly spoken all over the country, as the case in most Arab countries, or it is the language of the elite. The more powerful groups in a society usually force their language upon the less powerful groups. If we take Finland as an example, the minority groups like the Sami, Romanies and Swedes have to learn Finnish whereas the Finns do not have to learn the other languages (Romaine 1994). However, a language that is politically chosen does not necessarily contradict with unity and neutrality. It is usually accepted by the other societal groups as the case in Finland.

In Ethiopia, almost all the emperors who ruled the country were Amharic speakers. Therefore, Amharic became the language of the court and the official language of the state. The other indigenous languages were ignored. Under the reign of Haile Selassie, whose aim was to develop the country, English was used as the medium of instruction in the secondary and tertiary level (Bloor and Tamrat 1995).

In Iran, English was the medium of instruction in the education system before the Islamic Revolution. Highly qualified officers in the army were sent to English-speaking countries for their training and further degrees. However, the use of English in school and university education was completely eradicated after the Islamic revolution. The University of Tehran, for example, was closed for five years and reopened when Persian was introduced. That was because the United States stood as the first enemy of the new Islamic Republic of Iran which created a negative attitude towards the English language from the politicians part. (Tollefson 1991)

### **Modernization**

The fourth and last national factor is modernization. The three ways that can be identified as the way to modernization are the development of the economy, meeting labour market demands and replacing expatriates. Cook (1991) cites that the medium of instruction should be able to serve the needs of the nation in local and international trade and commerce. The nation's desire to expand its commercial ties will result in a need for individuals who are capable of communicating in the new trade partner's language. The education system is seen as the place to produce these individuals (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997). For example, Australia has determined that its major trade partners are Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia and Singapore. Therefore, the education

system has considered the introduction of these countries' languages at various schooling levels.

The other issue that have to borne in mind when deciding on a medium of instruction is what professions require the knowledge of what language and to what extent. This will enable the education system to reduce the gap between what the labour market needs and what graduates have. Dubin and Olshtain (1986) suggest that the question to what extent the community is dependant on foreign experts should be considered when aiming at replacing expatriates. High dependence on experts who speak a certain language will influence the need to qualify students with the knowledge of that language.

It can be said that the best way to replace expatriates is using the mother tongue in the workplace as well as the education system. However, this may be difficult in colonies and developing countries. The country's financial inability may stand against the creation of local materials and textbooks. It can also be time consuming to build the language in a way that enables it to function in the different domains. Furthermore, the mother tongue might be unable to engage the country in the commercial world and therefore achieve modernity and prosperity because it is not spoken elsewhere in the world.

### **Individual Factors**

The choice of a language to function as the medium of instruction is also influenced by individual factors. Their positive attitude towards the language and the culture it represents can be greatly influential. Teachers can play a great role in raising learners' appreciation of a specific language. They can raise their awareness of the importance of the language and the role it plays in the society. Categorized in higher education, accessibility of technological information and second language communication individual factors should be considered when planning a medium of instruction.

### **Higher Education**

The individual needs and expectations of a future career can influence the system of education a person will choose. An important individual factor is higher education. In some countries higher education uses a different language than the school system or in another country. For example, English is the medium of instruction for most subjects in the National University of Singapore and Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. Therefore, individuals need to be equipped with the other language to cope with their study.

### **Accessibility to Technological Information**

Another reason is accessibility to technological information. Grape and Kaplan, as cited in Tollefson (1991), state that according to the

Federation Internationale de Documentation approximately 85 per cent out of 7000 scientific articles published every day is in English. Therefore, the availability of this mass of documents in another language for many countries has a great impact on the individual's choice of the higher education system. This is very clear in the existence of schools flourishing outside the official education system where this fails to meet the needs of individuals. In Oman for example, most of the scientific journals and instruction catalogues accompanying modern machinery are either in English only or in English and the language of the country that produces the machines.

### **Second Language Communication**

In multilingual societies, or even in monolingual ones, the desire to communicate with the speakers of the other languages can be an individual factor that affects planning the medium of instruction. Within one country there might be different languages or even different varieties of one language. However, there should be a language or a variety that everyone agrees on and is perceived as a facilitator of communication.

Having listed some of the national and individual factors that influence the planning of a medium of instruction, it is of value to shed some light on the dangers that might occur because of choosing a specific language. The introduction of a new language in the curriculum is not as easy as it seems to be. Most of the languages or subjects are supported by either groups of society or needs of organisations. Problems can be classified according to the stages of language choice. Two groups can be identified in this respect, planning problems and implementation problems.

### **Choosing the Language**

According to the factors discussed above, the chosen language should satisfy at least most of the criteria. It should seek unification of the nation, be neutral, and satisfy the nation's as well as the individuals' needs of progression and modernisation. One of the solutions is carrying out needs analysis and surveys to find out what language or variety can best serve as a medium of instruction.

### **Materials**

Rubagumya (1990) states that poor countries like Tanzania cannot afford the importation of books and foreign materials. This will create high dependency on foreign resources, which prove to be unsustainable. The case of Ethiopia is no different. Although resources were inadequate there exist some pedagogic texts in Amharic. Outside the school system written materials that can serve as a back-up were also available in Amharic. Cooper (1989) states that there was nothing or very little available in other languages.

However, to overcome this problem Rubagumya (1990) suggests establishing publishing bodies to help the poor countries. He gives examples of the British Government-funded English Language Support Project which made the problem less obvious.

### **Qualified Teachers**

Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) claim that the introduction of a new language into the curriculum will be impeded by a shortage of qualified teachers who are sufficiently well trained in language pedagogy and reasonably fluent in the target language. This may result in a demand for expert foreign teachers or a pressure to use teachers of lower competence.

If the case of Hong Kong is considered, Tung (1990) states that teachers in Hong Kong received their education in English. Therefore, they are familiar with the terminologies, reference materials and textbooks which make it difficult for them to teach in Cantonese. This is one of the difficulties that face the change of medium of instruction to Cantonese in Hong Kong. Another example is Oman where science student teachers receive their university education in English but they teach in Arabic. Therefore, they have to translate what they have learned in English into Arabic which sometimes leads to problems because they are not good interpreters.

However, where a new language is introduced as the medium of instruction, the country can depend temporarily, on native speaker teachers, whilst training local teachers in the language. In Australia, for instance, teachers from neighbouring countries are employed to help qualify and train local teachers and at the same time teach the language that they natively speak (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997).

### **Coping with the Language**

Another problem is that students sometimes cannot cope with the new language because they are not prepared to do so. Yu (1988) states that studies found out that using English as the medium of instruction in Hong Kong leads to lowering the education standard and stifles many pupils' initiative and desire to learn, because they are not good enough to study in English. Some agreed that they are afraid of asking questions in class. In Oman, university students are sometimes forced to change to an Arabic medium college if they cannot pass the English test. Being unable to cope with the demands of study can also create a shortage in the labour forces or a high dependency on foreign experts.

One way to solve this problem is that students should be introduced to the target language gradually. Teachers can help students develop an awareness and appreciation of other cultures without encouraging them to take on their beliefs. Moreover, frequency of teaching is

recommended in this case. Instead of having a class every week for three months, it is much better to have three classes per week for a month (Ellis 1985).

On a classroom level, Ellis (1985) cites that teachers should use eliciting styles rather than informing styles in their directed instructions. Opportunities for real communication need to be increased in order for language acquisition to take place. In other words, teachers should promote language production by asking questions that require more than one word answers. In order to achieve this teachers should receive adequate training to use the target language in their teaching.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of the paper is to review the literature in relation to language planning in general and language in education in particular. The education system can be regarded as the place where the nation's language integrity is maintained. It should appeal to different societal groups and satisfy the needs of individuals. Therefore, the language to be chosen to function as the medium of instruction should be free from any suspicion of problems. It should be able to serve the local as well as the wider and international needs of the nation.

In the light of the examined literature, it can be said that the factors influencing the choice of a particular language may affect the intensity of application from one nation to another. In other words, in places like Tanzania and Ethiopia the factors of unity and neutrality greatly influence the choice of the medium of instruction. However, in places like Iran the political power influences language planning more than other factors.

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