PROBLEMS RESULTING FROM THE USE OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

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Background to the Problems[1]

English has already been instituted as the second language medium of instruction throughout the education systems of a number of countries, and is in the process of being introduced in others. These countries include Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia and Sierra Leone, Zambia, Malawi, Uganda and Kenya (as well as Papua-New Guinea where movements in education in other parts of the world have been strongly felt). It is claimed in this paper that the problems to be discussed are common to all education systems based on a second language medium and may be inherent in any such system.

These problems were by no means unforseen. Educational systems based upon a second language medium of instruction were often criticized in the past - in fact condemned outright. Many Nationalists pointed out that education through a second language was psychologically, culturally and educationally undesirable: educationally undesirable specifically in that it limited what content could be taught, the methods by which it could be taught and the whole nature of what might be experienced as part of the educational process.

For primary education at least, the British colonial administration in Africa agreed on the importance of the vernacular In 1927 a report entitled 'The Place of the Vernacular in Native Education' insisted upon the need to teach through the language "in which a pupil has learnt from infancy to name the things he sees, hears and handles"[2] and the 1943 'Memorandum on Language in African Schools' Education' was equally explicit: "It is surely unquestionable that in a school course of six years (i.e. primary education) the instruction must be given entirely through the medium of the vernacular." The report did acknowledge that this ideal would not always be attained.[3] By the end of the colonial era English was being used as the medium of instruction in many upper primary schools, but the importance of the vernacular language at the junior primary

school level was firmly maintained.

UNESCO reports in the early '50's on language and education also recommended the use of the vernacular languages in primary education for psychological, cultural and educational reasons.

However, by the early '60's a number of countries were committed in theory and practice to the introduction of English as the medium of instruction as early as possible in primary schools, which in many cases (as in Papua-New Guinea) meant from the point of entry. The reasons for this revolution in attitudes were partly 'logistical', but there was also disillusionment with educational progress in Asia and the Middle Eastern countries where vernacular languages had been adopted as the medium of instruction. It was also generally considered that success at the secondary level of education would be vital to the promotion of economic development, and that this success would depend on the pupil's ability to receive instruction through the medium of English. A Commonwealth conference on the teaching of English as a second language, held at Makerere University in Uganda in 1961, took note of successes that had been achieved in experimental studies of the use of second languages as the medium of instruction and concluded: "In countries where English is regarded as a second language, its teaching should be based on its direct use as a spoken language, and it should be introduced as early as possible in the child's school life, when this is of advantage to the child: (when English is used as a teaching language at an early stage in the school programme ... a decision to use English as a medium of instruction is likely to be inevitable"[4]).

At very much the same time, other pressures and aspirations were bringing about a rapid expansion in the educational systems of the newly independent and soon to be independent nations. And in this expansion the highest priority was given to expansion at the primary level.[5] Thus a number of countries were committed by the early 60's both to the attainment of universal primary education and to the use of English as the medium of instruction, which is precisely the position here in Papua and New Guinea.

It is now becoming possible to evaluate the results of the implementation of these policies. The position varies, needless to say, from one country to another, but a

pattern seems to be emerging which is sufficiently typical to allow an overall examination of some of the problems that have arisen.

The Problem of Course Content

Traditionally pedagogical arguments have been concerned with what to teach and how to teach it, or 'content' and 'method', the medium of instruction being taken for granted. Where English was made the second language medium of instruction, language itself came to be regarded as the content of the course. But language is not content, it is the medium by which content is carried. A medium of communication has no intrinsic value whatsoever. The time and effort that goes into establishing it is justified only in terms of the 'traffic' which it carries, and until the medium has been established this traffic necessarily relates largely to the actual work of construction. In the countries we are discussing, even by the end of primary schooling, the English language is a precarious medium of communication for most of the pupils; and so we have the problem of a 'course without content', a language-oriented course where the pupils establish only the means by which 'content' may be acquired at some time in the future.

We might contrast this situation with the 'content-orientated' primary school course in Tanzania using the lingua franca, Swahili. This course is designed to suit the life and the needs of a rural and largely subsistence farming community. Its content includes instruction in agricultural skills, maintenance of farm machinery, techniques of co-operative organisation, buying and marketing etc. Tanzania is far from having solved all her educational problems but such skills as these, which are surely vital to an underdeveloped nation, are notably absent from primary courses or other preliminary courses which use a second language medium of instruction.

The Problem of Course Design

When the rapid expansion of the educational system began, the materials most generally used in the schools were books designed for native speakers of English. The use of such materials in West Africa during the 1950's led to extremely unsatisfactory results; and more and more people specialised in the teaching of English as a second language and in the preparation of suitable materials. While there is controversy over the relative merits of various methods of language teaching, old and new, there is little doubt that

language teaching efficiency has been greatly improved by such techniques as the selection of vocabulary and structure on the basis of frequency of occurrence, range of use, learnability; the controlled introduction and revision of new items; guided composition etc.[6] But a price must be paid in terms of content by the student. Even supposing that through his ingenuity the E.L.T. specialist does manage to inject real content into his language-oriented course, he is unlikely to have specialised knowledge of the problems of rural development etc. in under-developed countries. His background is likely to be of a Western culture, and of a developed urban society, and the materials he writes will reflect his background.

The problems already discussed, of course design and the lack of content, seem to me to be inherent and ineradicable defects in any language-oriented course. The other problems to be considered may be minimized in time; but the seriousness of the problems, and the difficulty in eradicating them, is greatly increased by the second language situation.

Primary School Teaching Problems

The minimal qualification for a primary school teacher in many of the countries we are considering is primary education plus one year of teacher training. At best the primary school teacher may have Junior Secondary education plus three years of teacher training. In both instances teacher trainees would be selected from those who were not able to continue to a higher level of education: the 'drop-outs', in fact. Even the best of these teachers are not fluent in their use of English, and at worst they are barely literate. So we have a situation where teachers with a limited educational background are further restricted by the need to communicate through a language in which they have no fluency.

Course writers found that their materials were not being presented effectively - a major reason for the slow progress of primary school pupils and for the lack of correlation with results achieved in experimental studies - and in order to combat the teachers' inadequacies, course materials have been increasingly programmed, or 'teacher-proofed.'

The main characteristic of the teacher-proof course is that it gives the teacher as little opportunity as possible to interfere with the learning processes of his pupils. In

extreme examples of this type of course, every detail of every lesson is programmed; the teacher is told exactly what he should be doing at any given moment in any given class. His materials and aids are all provided, with detailed instructions for their use.

Such courses have achieved success in that the standard of English spoken by the primary school leaver has been improved, and the teachers themselves have welcomed rather than resented this ultra-directed approach. Inevitably, however, as language orientation is increased and the E.L.T. specialist tightens his grip, opportunities for even the accidental or informal introduction of 'content' into lessons tend to be eliminated.

Teaching Problems in Secondary Schools

The expansion of the various educational systems has not been as great at the secondary level as at the primary level; nevertheless it has been considerable, and with the demands that independence inevitably makes upon educated and skilled manpower resources , the secondary education systems of many countries are now even more heavily dependent upon expatriate teaching staff than they were before independence.

These expatriate teachers are usually highly trained by world standards, but their training is of little assistance to them in a second language teaching situation. The English language teachers usually have a purely literary background , and the teachers of other subjects are equally unprepared for the adjustments that need to be made. On the pupil's side there are also problems; he has a limited vocabulary and only the basic structures of the language, with little fluency in manipulating them; but perhaps his greatest handicap is that in general he develops no adequate learning strategies from his experience in primary school. He is aware that there are right answers and wrong answers and that he must remember the right ones, but that is often as far as the limitations of the primary school course have allowed him to go. The result in extreme cases is a total breakdown in communication between teachers and pupils which rather defeats the purpose of bringing highly trained and highly paid expatriate teachers into the secondary school system.

Conscientious teachers come to terms with the situation eventually, but contracts only last for from two to three years, and many teachers don't return for second contracts.

The Problem of the 'Ever-onward Ever-upward' Educational System

It is a feature of the Western educational system that it has no end-product. Education is a continuing process: primary schooling prepares the pupil for secondary education, and the secondary stage leads on to the tertiary. With universal secondary education there are no 'drop-outs' in the sense used here, and if the school leaver can actually 'do' very little, this is unimportant, since he is trainable and jobs are available where he can receive the training he needs. The university graduate is not fitted for a particular job either; he too is 'trainable', and since it will be fifteen to twenty years before he achieves a position of any great responsibility, he has plenty of time to learn his job while he is waiting. The system suits the requirements of Western society well enough, though the student generation is sometimes less than enthusiastic, and a demand for 'relevance' is being heard with increasing frequency.

This 'ever-onward ever-upward' approach to education was inherited from the colonial administration and has never been superseded. It is ideally suited to the language-orientated course that we have been considering, where it is the role of the primary school to provide the minimal literacy in English necessary for secondary education, and secondary education provides the general background for tertiary education. But this approach is totally unsuited to the needs of under-developed nations who have committed most of their available educational resources to primary education, partly at the expense of the higher levels. The 'ever-onward ever-upward' system is not geared to the needs of the 'drop-out'; yet in the countries we are considering somewhere between 60% and 75% of all children who enter primary school do not continue to secondary level; and of those who continue to junior secondary level, perhaps 40% do not reach forms III or IV.

Perhaps as many as 80% of these school leavers live in rural areas where subsistence farming is the basic way of life, and where social and economic change is desperately needed. Yet, after six or seven years of formal education, the primary school leaver is left dissatisfied with his life and expectations in the village, without having gained the knowledge and skills which might enable him to change those conditions for the better.

The Problem of School-leaving Age

Assuming that the primary school leaver is trainable through the medium of English,

and assuming that jobs are available, most school leavers would now be unable to apply for them; they are too young. Before the educational expansion children often didn't begin their education until nine or ten years of age, and schooling was often interrupted when families moved, or when a wage-earner was temporarily unemployed. However it is now increasingly common for pupils to enter the system at five or six years of age and leave at eleven or twelve; with average school-leaving age being fourteen to fifteen years. The school leaver may then either remain in his village, in which case he will probably lose his precarious hold on the English language within two years, or go to the town, to join the unemployed shanty town dwellers there.

The Problem of Contacting the Right People

Ten years ago education was regarded hopefully as a political and economic panacea. The education system would promote development and social change through contact between the teacher and the local people. But for this dynamic interchange to take place, the teacher and his role would have to be identified with the needs of the community, and where the medium of instruction is a second language, and the course language-orientated, the school and its teacher inevitably represent an alien way of life, however prestigious.

The second language medium has also restricted more formal contacts with village leaders through adult education; a serious problem since it is only the people with power and influence in a community who bring about change. Such people can often be persuaded to lead, but resist changes instigated from outside which seen to threaten their positions of authority.

Conclusion

There are many other problems which can't be discussed here: the possible restricting effects of a second language on conceptual development, the possible psychological effects of a second language education system, particularly on five and six year old children; and the socio-cultural effects of handing over the formal education of adolescents to expatriates with a completely alien background. No research has been carried out in these fields as far as I know. The problems that have been considered here have been dealt with all too briefly and superficially, but several points seem to be in need of serious reconsideration.

1) Educational policy makers in the countries concerned should look again at the possibility of using vernacular languages or a lingua franca as the medium of instruction in primary schools, and for adult education.

2) It is the traditional function of any education system to prepare children for their future roles in society. This obligation is not being fulfilled for perhaps 80% of the pupils in the education systems we have been discussing.

3) Finally, when and if a content-orientated course replaces the present language-orientated course, serious thought should be given to raising the age at which schooling begins, so that the primary school leaver will be old enough to gain the maximum benefit from his training.

FOOTNOTES

1. The background of the problem in Commonwealth Africa and the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent is presented in considerable detail in 'Language in Education', by Dakin, Tiffen and Widdowson, (Oxford University Press 1968, Languages and Language Learning series) The following page references are to this book.
2. p. 75
3. p. 77
4. p. 84
5. The report of the UNESCO conference of African States on the 'Development of Education in Africa', held in Addis Ababa in May 1961 recommended a target date for universal primary education.
6. These 'tools of the trade' are perhaps most exhaustively described by W.F. Mackey in 'Language Teaching Analysis" (Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd. London 1965).