Report
2019

The University of Manchester

African languages in secondary schools

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1 Introduction

This research project investigated the role of secondary education systems and the attitudes of African language speakers in the importance of maintaining their heritage language in a native English speaking country. Changes were made to our methods to strengthen our investigation, and due to difficulties in collecting data. Through literature readings, we established three important themes to address throughout our research: prioritising English, the UK's language policy, and attitudes towards maintaining heritage languages.

2 Literature Review

In our first theme, prioritising English, we examined Kamwangamalu's (2003) discussion of the socioeconomic pressures on the maintenance of African minority languages in South Africa. The country's political history was suggested to have negatively impacted the attitudes of indigenous minority languages within the Black urban population. These pressures appear to create a shift from minority African languages to prioritising majority languages, English and Afrikaans. Kamwangamalu describes how parents more often prioritise these majority languages in the home and educational domains, believing that knowledge of these languages increases opportunities in social mobility and are therefore more important than minority languages. This highlights the issues of indigenous African language extinction in this area, but also brought attention to whether this was the case in a country of native English speakers here in the UK. As both countries also have different opportunities for upward social mobility, this led our investigation into whether parents and their secondary school children in the UK have contrasting attitudes to those in South Africa, and what schools might be doing to prevent minority language extinction.

Additionally, Fillmore (1991) expressed that in America, once a child learns English at school they will most likely not maintain or develop their native language due to pressures of assimilation and the value of one language over another. We investigated if this was also the case in Manchester schools, where there is a presence of African communities.

In our second theme, UK language policy, we further explored what schools are doing to maintain African heritage languages. A 2016 National Curriculum reform attempted to include more ancient and modern community languages in school curriculums. However, these did not include African languages other than Arabic. Lamb (2001) also discussed whether monolingual students should be taught community languages to increase their status and the public's perception of them. Our research project investigated secondary school children's attitudes regarding this, and whether it has an effect on the maintenance of African heritage languages. Additionally, the lack of African minority language education in schools may encourage many parents to send their children to supplementary schools (Matras & Robertson, 2015), the only

state initiative for maintaining African languages. We recorded secondary school children's attitudes regarding these supplementary schools, whether they are valuable and whether they attended.

Our final theme explored how in Californian public schools, a teacher's lack of appreciation for heritage languages can lead to many children viewing these languages as less important and can lead to language abandonment (Lee & Oxelson, 2010). It is suggested that a lack of recognition for these languages creates negative attitudes towards heritage languages. This theme also encouraged our research on the students' attitudes of their heritage language as a means of cultural identity.

3 Method

School Background

We conducted our research and focus group at a different secondary school in Manchester due to confirmation issues with our original school. We will be using the pseudonym "Sycamore High School" to maintain anonymity. This school was located in North Manchester, contrastingly to the original school in South Manchester. The school is religious with strong Christian values of community and faith, which could influence how the students speak out during the focus group in front of their peers. Manchester is a city home to more than 150 languages (Matras & Robertson, 2015), therefore the multicultural school did have a presence of speakers or understanders of African community languages sufficient for conducting our research. In 2017, the school was ranked in the bottom 10% nationally by Ofsted, with low English and Maths pass rates, poor leadership and behavioral and attendance issues (appendix image 1). Although a new headteacher was brought in to reform the school, we expected that the students might have had a somewhat unsatisfactory educational experience. Additionally, the age range of our sample was slightly younger than originally planned with 15-16 year-olds as opposed to sixth form students, again due to issues of finding a school willing to participate in our research.

The Focus Group

We provided the school with parental consent forms (appendix image 5) to conduct our focus group. Prior to the focus group, we altered the parents' questionnaires using multiple choice answers and Likert scale questions to assist our analysis of their attitudes towards their heritage languages. The questionnaires were based on our research questions. However, we did not receive a sufficient number of questionnaires for this to be a valuable element included in our investigation. We then conducted a focus group with the year 11's, addressing our research questions on attitudes towards maintaining African heritage languages. We received approval to record the audio of two focus groups of 5-6 students, which allowed us to transcribe and

analyse our qualitative data in detail. We reordered our stimuli questions to allow for a better flow of conversation and to elicit more useful data. This restructuring can be seen in the appendix (image 2) along with the transcriptions (image 3, 4).

4 Findings and Discussion

Table 1

Focus group 1			
Participant	**Country of origin**	**African language(s)**	**Self-declared level of proficiency**
1	Congo	Lingala (and French)	Intermediate
2	Nigeria	Igbo	Able to understand
3	Nigeria	Igbo	Able to understand
4	Nigeria	Benin	Able to understand
5	Nigeria	Igbo	Able to understand

Table 2

Focus group 2			
Participant	**Country of origin**	**African language(s)**	**Self-declared level of proficiency**
1	Nigeria	Benin	Some understanding
2	Sweden (parents from Congo)	Lingala (and French)	Intermediate
3	Cameroon	None (Pidgin English and French)	Very little understanding
4	Nigeria	Benin	Some understanding
5	Nigeria	Benin	Unknown
6	Nigeria	Benin	Unknown

Table 3

Focus group 2			
Participant	**Year of migration to UK**	**Age on arrival in UK**	**Country of residence prior to migration**
1	2012	9	Nigeria then Spain
2	2011	8	Sweden
3	2012	9	Cameroon
4	Unknown	Unknown	Nigeria
5	2009	6	Nigeria
6	2012	9	Nigeria

Language identification and use in the Home Domain

Within our focus group of 11 students, 3 African languages were spoken or understood, with 5 students knowing Benin, 3 knowing Igbo, and 2 knowing Lingala and French. 1 student did not speak any African languages but understood Pidgin English and French, which are both spoken within some African communities.

Through our focus group research, we found these African languages were spoken at home in most cases, although some of the students reported only having interactions in these languages at family events. In group 1, all students stated that they spoke English at home, and that when family members used an African language they would "not listen" or participate. They also said that if an African language was used at mealtimes, this would consist of random words rather than complete conversation. In group 2, participant 3 responded that their parents spoke to each other in their African heritage language, but spoke to their children in English, whilst participants 1 and 2 were spoken to in their African languages. Participants 2 and 3 claimed that other than with their spouse, their parents would also speak their African languages with other members of their community. This tendency to speak to their children in English relates to the importance that the parents and children assign to each language.

Prioritising English or African languages in the UK

In group 2, participants 1, 3 and 4 all agreed that knowing English is more important to them than their African language, as being the world's lingua franca, it "opens a lot of doors" and increases upward social mobility. Participant 1 also stated how learning French was more important for him than Lingala, which shows that as well as English, he values other more widely spoken languages over his African heritage language. This shows that these participants

share the same views and attitudes of the Black urban community parents in South Africa (Kamwangamalu, 2003), who believe in the importance of prioritising English for the success of their children, due to its status and prestige in today's globalised world.

Furthermore, in group 1, participants 1 and 2 discussed negativity they had encountered from peers surrounding the practice of their African language. This occurred in the context of the World Cup when English students argued they should speak English and support England now that they are residents here. This links to Lee & Oxelson (2010) who discussed how negativity surrounding one's heritage languages can lead to the individual feeling negatively about their own heritage language and wanting to abandon it. Additionally, this pressure from peers relates to the findings from Fillmore (1991), in that the demand to assimilate can lead to abandonment of the heritage language. Despite this, participant 1 went on to say how he would still speak French with his peers as he wanted to prove a point, so was not as affected by the negative comments. Again, this could relate to French being seen as a useful and widely spoken language, unlike his African language.

Supplementary and Mainstream Schools

Despite most of the participants using their African language at home, none of the parents sent the participants of either group to a supplementary school. In group 1, when asked whether they would pay for supplementary language education, the participants perceived this as amusing and stated that they would not want to finance it, as it was not seen as being worth the money. Additionally, it could be due to the lack of necessity of their language in the UK, due to their mainstream schools' promotion of learning more widely spoken languages such as French or Spanish.

In group 2, the overall consensus was that if a supplementary school that specifically supported their African language skills was available, they would definitely attend. Matras and Robertson (2015) investigated the maintenance of heritage languages in Manchester and found that supplementary schools were the only effective method of language maintenance for first and second-generation immigrants. Since none of the participants attended such schools, they did not have the opportunity to formally learn their African language, which highlights the lack of government or state aid in maintaining their heritage language, despite their apparent interest in studying their heritage language at GCSE level.

In group 1, participants 1 and 4 thought that it is the parents' responsibility to teach African languages to their children, rather than the school's. Participants 1 and 2 claimed that they would like to study an African language GCSE if the option were available. Participant 3 stated that they would take the responsibility of passing down the African language to their

children if they had the linguistic capabilities, but did not see it as an important matter. This confusion regarding whose responsibility it is to teach African languages is similar to that found by Lee & Oxelson (2010). They discuss how language learning is not only an individual process, but one that requires educational support at a societal level. The language shift present within the families of these participants demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the current language support in place for these students.

None of the students were taught their African languages in school. This is due to the absence of any UK policy allowing students to practice their African languages at school, and therefore the participants have not had the opportunity to enhance their learning of the language. Wolff's concept of "linguistic prejudice" (2000; 306) can be used to explain why African heritage languages are not taught in mainstream schools. Only a minority of the population would benefit from this, and even that does not appear to outweigh the benefits they receive from learning English or other modern foreign languages such as French.

However, due to a general interest from our participants in studying an African language at GCSE level, Lamb (2001) may be correct in thinking that there is a need for a national framework for language education in order to meet the demands of speakers of African community languages.

Language and Culture

In group 1, participants 2 and 4 agreed that monolingual English speaking students should have the opportunity to learn African languages and that this would enrich their understanding of African culture. In group 2, 4 out of 6 participants agreed that monolingual English speaking students should be able to learn African languages at school. Participant 1 maintained that this would help their fellow students to understand their culture and "what it's like to be African".

However, in this discussion surrounding culture, it was debated whether learning a language also entails cultural understanding and appreciation, since language and culture are often seen as intertwined. Participant 1 from group 1 disagreed that learning an African heritage language would equate to cultural appreciation. As well as just language learning, time spent in the original country is often seen as the pinnacle of understanding culture. Therefore the question was raised of whether it should be the parents and/or the school's responsibility to develop the students' cultural understanding. This highlights the need for further research in this area.

In group 1, all the participants agreed that knowing an African language, as well as English, was important for their cultural identity, as well as useful for communicating with family members. Participant 2 and 3 answered that they would pass their African language to their children, while participant 1 expressed the desire to only teach his children French, as they

regarded their African language as less useful, and furthermore did not consider their African language skills as adequate. In group 2, participants 1 and 2 stated that learning their African language is important to them, and participant 1 elaborated that it is a way of showing support and pride for your heritage. 3 out of 6 participants said that they would teach their children their African language in the future, although participant 1 recognised the difficulty of this if the African language had not been maintained. They went on to explain that any form of bilingualism or multilingualism is useful, and that they would encourage language learning in general.

Language Pressure from Older Generations

In group 2, participants 1, 2 and 3 all admitted to feeling pressured by their family to learn their African language. Participant 3 explained that at family events they cannot understand when their uncles speak to them in French, and this makes them feel pressured to learn it, which can cause a sense of isolation and exclusion between older and younger generations. Participants 1 and 4 felt pressured at home, especially participant 1, whose father always addresses them in Benin. This pressure from family to practice their African language demonstrates how their parents' opinions and attitudes affect the maintenance of these languages. However, often the familial pressure on language maintenance is counteracted by the school's lack of support of these African heritage languages, compared to their prioritsation of modern foreign languages.

Country of Residence

In group 2, participant 2 believed that if they lived in their family's country of origin, English would be very beneficial, whereas participants 1 and 6 argued that it wouldn't be useful because it is not as widely spoken. This again shows how language importance is based on how often it is spoken and if it is needed, linking back to South Africa's political policies which state how it is important to prioritise English due to its status and prestige in the globalized world of today for the success of their children.

Matras and Robertson 2016 study into the language proficiency of multilingual students in Manchester found that language vitality is correlated to the time of immigration. Table 3 provides information on the year of arrival in the UK of participants from group 2. All of the students (except one unknown) had moved to the UK in the past 10 years, and at most, the students had only some understanding of their African language. This rapid decline in language proficiency highlights the role of the country of residence in the maintenance of their languages. All students, despite a reasonably recent immigration, spoke English fluently, which contrasts with their lack of understanding of their African languages.

5 Conclusions

From our research, it is clear that there is a desire amongst first and second generation immigrants to maintain their heritage language. This is due to factors including generational pressure and maintaining or strengthening cultural and social identities. However, these factors are not enough to effect real change as language shift still occurs. The vast majority of our participants felt incapable of communicating fluently in their heritage language and received little to no encouragement in continuing to learn it at home or in formal education. The usefulness of a language also appears to be important in shaping opinions about heritage languages. The participants argued that learning English and modern foreign languages such as French and Spanish provide greater opportunities than learning a heritage language, and so it would be a better use of time to learn these instead. These issues contribute to a lack of language maintenance, despite a desire to remain culturally close to the countries these languages originate from and the people who speak them.

In conclusion, the cultural dynamic of language for our participants generates a desire to learn their heritage language. However, practical and social issues prevent these aspirations from being realised. Without support from the state or their communities, and due to not only living in diasporas, but also the increasing advantages that learning European languages has for communication, learning and maintaining heritage languages becomes more and more impractical. There appears to be a need for a national framework for language education in order to resolve the confusion surrounding responsibility in heritage language maintenance.

6 Appendix

Image 1

2017 Ofsted report of Sycamore High School

Overall effectiveness	**Inadequate**
Effectiveness of leadership and management	**Inadequate**
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	**Inadequate**
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	**Requires improvement**
Outcomes for pupils	**Inadequate**
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Image 2

Focus Group Stimulus Questions:

Do you speak an African language?
- If so, which?

Do you speak these languages at home?
- If yes, why and with whom
- If no, where do you speak your African language(s)?

Do you attend a language school?
- If so, is it helpful – what do you like about it?
- If no, would you like to? Why?

Would you like to see African languages taught more in school?
- If no, do you prefer African languages to be separate from school, why?
- If yes, why do you think it's important?

Do you think students who speak only English should be able to speak a minority language like African languages?
- If yes, in what way should this be taught and why?

How important is it to you to speak an African language?
- If important, why do you think it is useful?
- If not, why do you think it is not important?
- Do you think you would like your children to learn it? If so, why?

Do you think it is more important to speak English or an African language in the UK? Why?

Do you feel pressure from older generations to know or speak African languages? Why do you think this is?

Do you think if your family still lived in the country of origin you would have a different opinion on which languages are important to speak?

Consent form for African languages focus group

Dear parent/guardian,

We are hoping to hear from your child/ward regarding which African language(s) they speak, in which situations and to whom. Through this short focus group, we would also like to hear their opinions on their African heritage language(s), and the importance they attach to the maintenance of this language(s). The focus group will also explore their thoughts on the role that mainstream and extra-curricular schools should play in maintaining their language(s).

The information provided by your child/ward in this focus group will be used for research purposes. It will not be used in a manner which would allow identification of any individual responses. All details will remain anonymous.

Yours,

[University of Manchester, students of Linguistics]

For any queries, please contact:
[redacted]

If you and your child/ward are happy for this focus group to be recorded (audio only), please tick ☐

If you are happy for your child/ward to partake in this focus group, please sign and date below.

Please sign here _____

Date _____

6 References

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