Using a narrative approach to researching literacy and non-formal education in Africa and Asia

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This special issue investigates literacy and non-formal education in Africa and Asia. The African examples are taken from South Africa and Tanzania, the Asian examples from the Philippines and Sri Lanka. The qualitative and narrative research approach used by most of the authors contributing to this issue is often described as an *autoethnographic* approach. In my introductory article (discussed below in section 1), I describe autoethnography as

an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*). (Brock-Utne, this issue)

Autoethnography is an approach which challenges conventional ways of doing research. The researchers using this approach treat research as a political, just and socially conscious act. Autoethnography provides an opportunity to explore some aspects of our social lives in a deeper and more sustained manner than conventional research methodologies. The resulting analysis draws upon personal experiences, which then inform our broader social understandings. These broader social understandings enrich our self-understandings. An autoethnographic approach implies the researcher's own voice describing the research findings (Creswell 2013).¹

The authors who contributed to this special issue give examples of the use of a narrative approach in researching literacy and language policy and language practice in the education system and training sector. Though the main focus is on Africa, complemented with some examples from Asia, the approaches we mention can be applied all over the world and to both the formal and non-formal sectors. This qualitative approach is not as well-known as quantitative research on the language issue. Examples of the use of such an approach provide a significant contribution to knowledge and may influence not only the type of research undertaken, but also

¹ Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

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policy and practice in lifelong learning. The target audiences are researchers, students, donor organisations and policymakers. This special issue offers new insights into ways of conducting research that may be more suitable in developing countries. Narrative approaches give voice to local people and take their experiences seriously. Several authors stress the importance of using these experiences as a basis for building up new theories. This may help to counteract the Western bias now so prevalent in much linguistic and educational research.

A university in Africa or Asia needs to take the culture and languages of the majority of Africans and Asians into account. There is a need to rewrite the content of textbooks, change curricula and restore the languages spoken in Africa and Asia. There is a need for narrative study of lives in Africa and Asia. Many Western language learning theories are irrelevant to the African or Asian continents. They are based on a different empirical reality, different life experiences and a different world view. It is important to work towards a paradigm shift in the thinking on language in education in Africa and Asia. This means searching for concepts that are built on non-Western roots, such as *ubuntu* translanguaging (see Sect. 6 below). A narrative approach is also more likely to grasp the realities of people in developing countries than many of the research methods developed in the West.

Researchers working in Africa and Asia are beginning to see that the narrative approach may be the best approach to study the acquisition of literacy and explore the learning going on in informal situations. In an article published in this journal last year, Joel Trudell and Ian Cheffy (2017)² relate narratives of change told by adults who have become literate in African languages. In their study, they give people who have learned to read and write as adults the opportunity to look back over a period of many years and to reflect on the difference which their learning has made over that time. Their own experiences about the impact of literacy on their lives provide telling evidence, with the researchers using an autoethnographic approach in their study

(1) Researching language and culture in Africa using an autoethnographic approach

In my introductory article to this issue. I explain why, through my own teaching at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, I became interested in the qualitative research method called *autoethnography*. I also draw on my experience of teaching qualitative research methods at a number of historically black universities in South Africa. Interestingly, a postgraduate programme with an autoethnographic approach was launched by the South African University of the Free State (UFS) Department of Sociology in 2012. Entitled “The Narrative Study of Lives”, this promising programme builds entirely on African experiences. In the last part of my article, I apply an autoethnographic approach to the study of languages in Africa. I cite some of my

² Trudell, J., & Cheffy, I. (2017). “We also wanted to learn”: Narratives of change from adults literate in African languages. *International Review of Education*, 63(5), 745–766.

Tanzanian students who told me that they grew up with several Tanzanian languages simultaneously. Terms coined by Western linguists like “mother tongue”, “first and second language” do not make sense to Tanzanians. One example is Moshi Kimizi, a former PhD student of mine, who

grew up with three Tanzanian languages simultaneously. He spoke one language – kiVinza – with his father and members of his father’s clan, another one – kiHa – with his mother and members of her clan ... From an early age, he spoke Kiswahili with all his friends. All three languages became part of his identity. He was brought up trilingually and was unable to pinpoint which one was his “mother tongue”, or even to order them into a hierarchy of 1st, 2nd or 3rd language (Brock-Utne, this issue; Kimizi 2009).³

I also introduce the concept of *ubuntu* translanguaging, an effective practice of purposeful juxtaposition of languages observed in African empirical research. This concept is explained further in the article by Leketi Makelela in this issue (discussed in section 6 below).

I argue that when it comes to building theories from the ground, the life experiences of Africans (in terms of everyday reality, indigenous knowledge, cultural transmission, community engagement etc.) should be taken into account. I demonstrate that the thinking and concepts of some African educational thinkers such as, for example, Julius Nyerere, fit the educational reality in Africa better than those of Western thinkers. I criticise the so-called “sandwich” programmes, where scholars from developing countries come to universities in the Global North, are taught theories there, go to their own countries to do fieldwork, return to their host country – where they are then asked to analyse their data according to the theories they learnt in the universities in the Global North.

(2) “If you don’t have English, you’re just as good as a dead person”: A narrative of adult English language literacy within post-apartheid South Africa

In the second article of this special issue, *Anna Kaiper* uses autoethnography to reflect on the story of Thuli, a 62-year-old black South African domestic worker. At the time of Kaiper’s research, Thuli was taking English language literacy classes outside of Johannesburg, South Africa.

For Thuli, English literacy is of vital importance because, as she claims, “if you don’t have English, you’re just as good as a dead person” (Kaiper, this issue).

³ Kimizi, M. M. (2009). From a Eurocentric to an Afrocentric perspective on language of instruction in the African context: A view from within. In K. K. Prah & B. Brock-Utne (Eds.), *Multilingualism – an African advantage: A paradigm shift in African language of instruction policies* (pp. 195–219). Cape Town: Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS).

This article employs autoethnography to expose the links between individual, social and political histories. Specifically, it centres on the life narratives of Thuli and the ways in which her stories are integrated into the complex history of language learning and adult education within South Africa. Utilising these coexisting histories and HERstories, Kaiper seeks to understand the multiple forces that impact a learner such as Thuli to become literate in English. By highlighting Thuli's narrative as well as demonstrating the roles that both Kaiper as the researcher and Thuli as the narrator play in the creation of her narrative, Kaiper attempts to exhibit the power of the narrative in further understanding nuances of language, power and identity. Moreover, Kaiper ventures to expose the ways in which the links between these concepts continue to affect adult learners in postcolonial South African adult basic education (ABE) and language learning. Finally, Kaiper links Thuli's experience to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁴ and highlights the ways in which adult education and domestic work are addressed in these new development goals. Kaiper attempts to reveal how the links between both goals are missing in policy documents. Using this narrative as an example of the complexity of English within South African ABE, what becomes apparent are the ways in which the desire to learn English is both individually nuanced and laden with historically (re)produced ideologies.

(3) Oral traditions: An aid to implementation of mother tongue-based multilingual education in the Philippines' basic education programme

Genevieve Jorolan-Quintero notes that in the Philippines, there are approximately 183 living languages, of which 175 are indigenous and 8 are non-indigenous. In 1973, Tagalog, which is the language used in the country's centre of government, the Luzon region, and Manila in particular, became one of the country's official languages together with English. It was later renamed Filipino. It is the first language in the region of Luzon, and the second language in the rest of the country. As an official language, Filipino is used and taught in schools alongside English.

English, however, is the main language of government, business, academia and media (broadcast and print), including even local newspapers. Most literature is also written in English. English is taught in schools and in some places it is used as the medium for instruction as early as kindergarten. A legacy imposed by Western colonialism, its use in higher education has been criticised as discriminatory to regional and indigenous languages other than Tagalog, which have not been allowed to develop as academic languages.

In 2012, the Department of Education issued DepEd Order No. 16, also known as Mother-tongue Based Multi-lingual Education (MTB-MLE). The MTB-MLE programme has now been implemented in all public schools, specifically in

⁴ UN (United Nations) (2016). *The sustainable development goals* [dedicated webpage; online resource]. Retrieved 12 June 2018 from <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>.

kindergarten and Grades 1, 2 and 3. Nineteen major local languages are included in the MTB-MLE programme of the Department of Education. The MTB-MLE programme faces challenging issues. The lack of textbooks, for instance, is becoming a major concern for the teachers. Although the Department of Education has provided some reading materials, they are either in English or Filipino, and require translation into the mother tongue, which the teachers have to do themselves.

For the past ten years, Jorolan-Quintero has conducted studies with indigenous communities in the southern regions of Mindanao. She describes her encounters with the indigenous communities using an autoethnographic approach. Aiming to contribute to the publication of mother tongue reading materials, her research yielded a collection of folk literature recorded in the language of the speakers. She collected: (a) myths, legends, folktales, jests, anecdotes; (b) folksongs and ballads; (c) epics; (d) folk drama; and (e) proverbs, riddles and folk poetry. This is a type of narrative research where the oral traditions are recorded from the lips of the singers, riddlers and storytellers. The texts recorded came

directly from the native bards who [were] considered by their community to be repositories of their traditional indigenous knowledge (Jorolan-Quintero, this issue).

The texts recorded in the language of the indigenous communities were translated into Bisaya, one of the major regional languages in the Philippines, and into English. The author sees potential in these texts as materials in reading and literature classes. With the publication of these indigenous literature texts, knowledge about language and culture is made accessible and available to basic education learners, and to the general public as well. The published reading materials, which contain the mother-tongue version, promote knowledge of, appreciation for, and proficiency in the learners' use of their first language.

(4) The effectiveness of teaching science subjects through English medium: A narrative analysis of teacher experiences and perceptions in Sri Lankan secondary schools

Lakshman Wedikkarage analyses four stories told by four teachers of science subjects in four different public secondary schools in the district of Gampaha in Sri Lanka. Their narratives focus on teaching science subjects in English at secondary level, a policy and practice which was reintroduced in a small number of selected government schools in Sri Lanka in 2002.

The British implemented English-medium instruction in 1832, reducing the number of government schools where the medium of instruction (MOI) was either Sinhala or Tamil from 97 to only five. Vernaculars were *re*-introduced as languages of instruction in all primary schools in 1945, in secondary schools in 1953 and at the universities in 1960. In the (post)colonial wake of this roller-coaster of reforms concerning the medium of instruction (MOI), Sri Lanka's literacy rate in local

languages now stands at 92 per cent (UIS 2017),⁵ one of the highest for a developing country.

In 2002, after having used the two most prevalent local languages, Sinhala and Tamil, for nearly half a century, the Sri Lankan education authorities decided to bring back the English medium to the teaching of science subjects at secondary level as a third language option for students to choose. One of the policymakers' reasons for this change was an apparent decline in English-language fluency of students at this level. To implement the new policy, science teachers (who had themselves studied and taught in Sinhala or Tamil) were asked to teach in English.

The four teachers interviewed by Wedikkarage in 2014, more than a decade into the English-medium option, taught physics, chemistry, biology and combined mathematics respectively. They were selected from top National Schools⁶ in the area. The author's narrative analysis of his respondents' stories provides valuable insights into the hardships experienced by both teachers and students when teaching and learning has to take place in a foreign language such as English. A female teacher of physics says that she would never have been able to learn physics herself had the subject been taught in English. In her own day, moreover, natural sciences were in fact quite popular subjects when they were taught through Sinhala or Tamil:

"There was an island-wide enthusiasm for learning science. Everybody wanted to study science. So, learning of science subjects became accessible to majority of people with the authorities implementing the local language policy" (Respondent 1, quoted by Wedikkarage, this issue).

She relates how her own teachers translated English science textbooks into the local languages, which was encouraged by universities.

Under the new, English-medium policy, all four teachers report that very often students now find it difficult to understand the lessons when they are taught in English. So the teachers complement their teaching with clarifying the lessons in Sinhala or Tamil, giving more detailed explanations in the mother tongue than they do during the lessons conducted in English. The teachers also report that their students, despite having opted for an English-medium course, talk all the time in Sinhala in discussions in the classroom.

The lived experiences of these teachers as told by them, Wedikkarage hopes, will challenge the idea of widening the reintroduction of English as a medium of instruction in science subjects in Sri Lanka. If the point is to improve students' English language fluency, this would more easily be done by strengthening the teaching of English as a foreign language.

⁵ UIS (UNESCO Institute of Statistics) (2017). Education and literacy Sri Lanka [online resource]. Retrieved 2 October 2018 from <http://en.unesco.org/countries/Sri-Lanka>.

⁶ A national school in Sri Lanka is a school which is funded and administered by the Ministry of Education of the central government, as opposed to provincial schools run by the local provincial councils.

(5) Towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: Revisiting language of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools

Mwajuma Vuzo begins her article by pointing out the fact that learning in a language that you are not familiar with poses two major challenges. First, you need to learn the language, and second, you struggle to understand the content presented in the language. Plenty of research studies have demonstrated the detrimental effects of using English, a foreign language, as the language of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools. Most of these studies recommend the use of a familiar language, like Kiswahili,⁷ as a language of instruction. However, despite the research evidence, the use of English as the language of instruction in secondary education in Tanzania has been maintained. This has many consequences on the quality of education, and negatively affects completion rates.

Vuzo's article investigates the extent to which language of instruction (LOI) seems to contribute to school dropouts in Tanzania. The author uses qualitative narratives from 36 respondents which show that despite there being a number of other factors leading to dropout, the use of a foreign language as LOI is clearly an attributing factor. Teacher-centred strategies predominate and students are passive. Previous studies have also shown that students do not engage in critical thinking and problem-solving when they are taught in an unfamiliar LOI. As a result, many students resort to rote learning. Most class sessions are characterised by what is called "safe talk" that involves chorus answers, repeating phrases after the teacher and copying notes from the blackboard. Since it is hardly possible for students to engage in problem-solving and discussion when they do not understand the LOI, students perform poorly in their subjects. This poor performance contributes to students' developing negative attitudes to schooling, ultimately leading to truancy, and in many cases eventually to dropout from school.

The student dropout tendencies at secondary education as caused by the unfamiliar LOI lead to a myriad of drawbacks which, in turn, negatively affect the realisation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Tanzania by 2030. Vuzo conducted interviews with 5 teachers in two secondary schools (10 teachers in total) to narrate their experiences on LOI in relation to student dropouts and the extent to which they saw language as a cause for dropouts. A total of 7 students in each school (14 students in total) were also involved in interviews by narrating their life stories at school. Vuzo also selected 12 dropouts from the respective districts whose personal schooling experiences were obtained. The dropouts were especially asked about the factors that led to them to leave school.

Vuzo's findings from these interviews indicate that the participants were aware of the problem of school dropouts. The problem was most pronounced in Forms I and II. Students start using English as LOI when they start Form I (their first year at secondary school). Students whose teachers resort to code-switching do acquire content knowledge:

⁷ Though there are many ethnic community languages in Tanzania, more than 95% of the population are also fluent speakers of Kiswahili.

“In most cases students know the answers to questions asked in Kiswahili, but they do not know how to answer in English. If you tell them to answer in Kiswahili, they will answer very well” (Teacher quoted by Vuzo, this issue).

But this content knowledge is no good to them in exams, which they are forced to sit in English.

Vuzo concludes that the LOI factor should not be underestimated in the development agenda. In order to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education”, as required in SDG 4,⁸ the government needs to adopt an optimal language policy that promotes effective teaching and equal access to quality education in secondary schools. That policy would be to use Kiswahili, a language spoken all over the country, as the language of instruction in secondary school. At the primary level it may be wise to start teaching in the ethnic community languages in areas where those languages are used more than Kiswahili.

(6) Community elders’ narrative accounts of *ubuntu* translanguaging: Learning and teaching in African education

Leketi Makalela relates how he “became acutely intrigued by the relationship between language, literacy and ways of knowing that are indigenous to speakers of African languages” due to his own educational experience:

Growing up in a remote rural village in South Africa under the care of my mother who was not able to make sense of the letters of the Roman alphabet and what they represented, I struggled to come to terms with the literacy programmes used at school. I went through learning programmes where teachers drilled us to sing letters, to memorise and regurgitate, without explaining what these letters stood for and what relevance they had for our lived experiences. Many children struggled to connect the dots of knowledge at school and failed dismally every time their progress was assessed in examinations. It was a poor pedagogy conducted in English from Grade 4 [halfway through primary school]. While the English monolingual schooling system pushed many learners out, I had the resilience to stay on and take on the literacy journey while asking myself the question: Why is there such a gap between school and our lived community experience? (Makalela, this issue)

Makalela decided to study languages to understand how they do not only represent ideas, but how they also embody ways of knowing. Questioning the alleged effectiveness of being forced to learn in a foreign language before one had at least six years of learning in familiar languages, he started looking at the possibility of

⁸ UN DESA DSD (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Sustainable Development) (2015). Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. United Nations Sustainable development knowledge platform [online resource]. Retrieved 2 October 2018 from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>.

valorising African cultural competence, where a fluid intersection of languages represents normal linguistic behaviour, a way of being and making sense of the world. In his quest to find an alternative pedagogy for multilingual learners, he found *translanguaging*, “a pedagogical strategy where there is complex alternation of languages of input and output in the process of meaning-making” (ibid.) – a type of communication which he recognised from the village he grew up in. He discovered there is hardly any research investigating pre-colonial African multilingualism or analysing pre-colonial narratives to offer alternative insights on African sociolinguistic and cultural realities. Besides the linguistic aspect of African cultural competence, the concept of *ubuntu* also has implications for teaching and learning in Africa. “*Ubuntu* is a philosophy of being that locates identity and meaning-making within a collective approach as opposed to an individualistic one. As a result, the individual is not independent of the collective; rather, the relationship between a person and her/his community is reciprocal, interdependent and mutually beneficial” (Oviawe 2016, p. 3).⁹ Using a framework of *ubuntu translanguaging* to account for complex multilingual encounters, Makalela contends that a preferred literacy methodology for learners should value interdependence of languages in tandem with their ancient plural value systems and indigenous ways of knowing.

In his article, Makalela analyses the narratives of six community elders to explain the nature of ancient multilingual encounters and indigenous modes of knowing that are still prevalent in contemporary South Africa. By juxtaposing (post)colonial educational strategies with traditional African methods and practices, he aims to demonstrate the potential of the latter for enabling more successful learning outcomes in South African schools. At the end of his article, he considers recommendations for alternative pedagogies and for future research in complex multilingual contexts. Similar to Genevieve Jorolan-Quintero in her article from the Philippines (in this issue) Makelela sees a potential in using oral literature from the communities in learning to read and write.

(7) My face is more than me. A Nordic researcher in the South: An autoethnographic retrospective perspective

The last article in the issue is by *Torill Aagot Halvorsen* from Norway. It builds on a six-year research project carried out by the author at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) in Tanzania. The research exposed the everyday practices of staff and students, which were characterised by linguistic constraints. During her fieldwork in connection with her PhD research, Halvorsen implemented a mixed-methods approach, using quantitative and qualitative tools, including questionnaires on the one hand and interviews and participating observation on the other. In addition to this, Halvorsen also always kept a notebook with her. She made field notes

⁹ Oviawe, J.O. (2016). How to rediscover the *ubuntu* paradigm in education. *International Review of Education*, 62(1), 1–10.

describing as well as reflecting on her reactions to what she encountered in the research process. While making these notes was not a deliberate part of her data collection, it was an important way of talking to herself. In retrospect, a few years after submitting her doctoral dissertation, these notes have become even more important to the author.

Halvorsen primarily builds on her autoethnographic field notes in this article, the purpose of which is twofold: on the one hand she reveals some of her own experiences as a researcher in unaccustomed surroundings, on the other hand, she uses her personal experience to describe, question and shed light on the discrepancies caused by language practices in Tanzanian higher education. She observes that despite English being the official UDSM language, Kiswahili is in fact used everywhere on campus. Many teachers' pragmatic solution in their lectures is to code-switch between Kiswahili and English; this appears to be a common, but unofficial practice. Halvorsen's observed experience when she interviewed directors and professors in their offices using English was that whenever her interviewee got a phone call, or another visitor came in, they would immediately switch to Kiswahili. She also describes how her encounter with a child changed dramatically when the author used the few words and sentences she knows in Kiswahili to address the child.

As a guest lecturer at UDSM, the Faculty of Education, Halvorsen asked her students to present their topics and research questions to each other. The presentations were discussed in groups or between two desk mates. The assignment and questions were posed in English. Gradually she noticed that the discussions got lively, active and in some groups even enthusiastic. She walked around in the classroom, pretending to read a book. At the same time she listened to the students' discussions. We let her conclude this introduction with words from her field notes:

I realise that concurrently with the activity, the language changes. After starting out in English, sending a short glance in my direction, they [the students] switch to Kiswahili. When they notice that I'm approaching, they switch back to English and the activity slows down. They are searching and fumbling for the right words. As soon as I'm on the other side of the room, they change back to Kiswahili and the activity increases.

This is an excellent example in two ways: First, academic discussions and presentations are all performed in Kiswahili. Hence, Kiswahili is an academic language performed by Masters' and PhD students. Second, it is obvious that the discussion flow is hindered when performed in English (Field notes, 20 November 2011, Halvorsen, this issue).

The observation made by Halvorsen shows an excellent use of an autoethnographic approach to the study the language of instruction issue in Africa.

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