Deconstructing Boundaries and Building Translanguaging Spaces for Effective Multilingual Learning

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Summary

The monolingualizing of education has constructed artificial educational spaces disconnected from the lived multilingual reality of individuals. We discuss how boundaries are created and maintained and how this negatively affects learning in Botswana, Tanzania, and Zambia. We conclude by advocating for the introduction of translanguaging spaces in education to deconstruct boundaries and provide more equitable, inclusive, and multilingual approaches to education.

Keywords

Translanguaging spaces
Boundaries
Primary education

Introduction

In this paper, we critically reflect on the role of boundaries in educational spaces and the extent to which boundaries create barriers and negatively impact the learning experience for children. We employ the concept of "translanguaging spaces" (Wei, 2018) to suggest approaches to education that may draw attention to the limitations and potentials of boundary work, highlighting where boundaries have negative impacts and challenging, deconstructing, and delinking from harmful boundary practices.

In the first section, we discuss how boundaries manifest in educational spaces, drawing on research on multilingualism and education in Tanzania, Botswana, and Zambia. In Section Two, we discuss the concept of translanguaging spaces, suggesting a further expansion of this notion based on empirical data from the three country contexts. We discuss the role which boundaries may have in the construction of translanguaging spaces. We conclude by advocating for the building of translanguaging spaces across education systems.

Research Contexts

The research we discuss here has its origins in the project *Bringing the Outside In: Merging Local Language and Literacy Practices to Enhance Classroom Learning and Achievement*, which was funded by the British Academy and investigated issues around multilingualism, education, and language policy in Botswana, Tanzania, and Zambia. The project ran from 2019–2022 and was a partnership between the Universities of Botswana, Dar es Salaam, Essex, and Zambia. The goal of the research was to investigate language practices and language attitudes both inside and outside

of educational spaces and to see to what extent language practices of students and their communities were used and valued by education policy and in the school environment. We adopted ethnographic methods and data collection including classroom observations, questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups.

The three countries differ in terms of their sociolinguistic and language policy situation. In Botswana, there are around 25–28 named languages, with the official language being English and the national language being Setswana. At the time of the project, language-in-education policy stated that Setswana should be used as the medium of instruction (MOI) in standard 1 and that English should be used as the medium of instruction from Standard 2 or as soon as is practical.[1] In Tanzania, there are around 150 named languages. The official language of the county is Swahili[2] and, in education, Swahili is the MOI for primary school, while English is the MOI for secondary school onwards. In Zambia, there are approximately 72 named languages. English is the official language, and there are seven national languages based on regions. The language-in-education policy in Zambia states that in the first four years of primary school a "familiar" language can be used as MOI, which in practice has meant one of the seven regional languages. English is taught as a subject from Grade 2, and from Grade 5 English is the MOI.

While there are differences in the linguistic situations and policy approaches, there are key similarities in each context. We suggest that, in these multilingual contexts, language-in-education policies have been constructed in an attempt to monolingualize education. Across each country, the majority of languages are not included in official legislation, MOIs at any given time are all monolingual with only one language being used as the MOI, and all of the policies are English dominant, with a switch to English at different points as students proceed in their education.

Legislation, language attitudes, and language practices intersect and influence one another (Spolsky, 2004) and contribute to how language policy is implemented and viewed in educational spaces. In the next section, we discuss how boundaries are created in education, drawing on data from our research.

Boundaries

Boundaries are widely prevalent in education systems across the world. The creation and maintenance of boundaries helps to uphold the status quo and perpetuate inequitable systems through practices of exclusion, othering, and marginalization. Boundaries manifest in many ways and can be "enacted through linguistic ideologies, language policies, or curriculum choice" (Windle et al., 2020, pp. xi–xii). We must recognize that the creation of boundaries is not a neutral act but an

ideological one. Boundaries "are everywhere and they are not only geographic; they are racial and sexual; epistemic and ontological; religious and aesthetic; linguistic and national" (Mignolo, 2018, p. 112). In educational spaces, multiple boundaries are created and students must face these boundaries as they engage with their learning. Boundaries influence the choices that are made for education, and they directly influence the learning experience. These boundaries can include boundaries between home and school, between subjects, between periods of school, between year groups, between assessments, and between lessons and play.

The creation of boundaries between languages is well established, with languages being separated, named, and counted following a monolingual ideology. Language-in-education policies help to maintain linguistic boundaries by legitimizing a limited number of named languages as suitable for education and by excluding other named and unnamed languages, as well as fluid multilingual practices and contribute to the "monolingualizing" of education systems (Heller, 1995). Such language-in-education-policies ignore the lived multilingual realities (Reilly et al., 2022) creating and sustaining artificial monolingual spaces in education

Two boundaries that are particularly relevant to our discussion are spatial boundaries and linguistic boundaries, which intersect and reinforce one another. These boundaries manifest mainly through the separation of named languages and the separation of the home and the school. We can see the ways in which boundaries manifest in education in the following quotations. The first is taken from a classroom observation and recording in a Standard 2 English lesson in Botswana.

Teacher: Any other word that starts with D? A English word. Yes? D for? It is a? Say it very loud.

Student 1: Tonki

Teacher: Do we say tonki in English? Who can help him? Do we say tonki in English? Who can help him?

Student 2: Donkey.

Teacher: D for donkey. We are in an English lesson so if you have to say out an answer you say it in English. Don't say a Setswana word. Donkey, D for donkey. D for donkey. For donkey, donkey. Any other word?

In this lesson, after receiving an answer in Setswana, the teacher explicitly states that this is not acceptable. The teacher reinforces the boundary between named languages and emphasizes that in English lessons, all answers must be in English, and that speaking in Setswana is not permitted.

Here, clear boundaries are being established between the two languages, with English being welcomed into the learning space and Setswana being discouraged. Alongside the linguistic boundaries, we also see that spatial and temporal boundaries are established which dictate when and where students are able to use different aspects of their multilingual repertoires.

The spatial aspects of boundaries are also exemplified in the following quotation from an interview with a parent in Zambia:

> *Eeh tukutituti muwufupi tukupusana, ndiwafuma walemba iciwemba kokoni cizungu, kootukulandavye icinamwanga ampela*
>
> *Yes we can say that, in short, we differ, when they do their work in Bemba and English at school, here at home we just speak Namwanga that's all*

(This interviewee is a middle-aged woman currently working as a farmer. She reports mainly speaking Namwanga, with some knowledge of Bemba.)

Boundaries here are established between the school space and the home space. These boundaries are in part realized by linguistic differences in those spaces. In school, teaching and learning is done in Bemba and English, but at home these languages are not used, instead "we just speak Namwanga." The languages of the school, of formal education, are not the languages of the home. Again, we see boundaries that reflect the physical spaces in which certain language practices are expected and accepted.

The final quotation from a parent in Tanzania shares similar themes:

> *Sukuma, Nyiramba, Dushi languages, my child should leave them at home. At school, the child should follow their teacher's instruction, which is Swahili. I am a Sukuma person, I speak Sukuma, but some Nyiramba people can't speak the Nyiramba in public, some Nyaturu people can't speak Nyaturu language in public, so my perspective is that the community languages should be left at home and at school Swahili should be used.*

(This interviewee is a man in his 40s. He reports speaking Sukuma as his natural language, and also speaking Swahili.)

In this excerpt, the parent shares their attitudes toward what languages should be used as the MOI in school. They favor the status quo and the use of Swahili. Clear boundaries are established between the school and home space, and the

parent's view is that languages other than Swahili have no place in the education environment and they should be "left at home," and children should then be motivated to construct boundaries within their own linguistic repertoires and "leave" certain linguistic resources in specific spaces. This view is in line with the language-in-education policy in Tanzania, which assigns individual languages to specific contexts and does not promote concurrent multilingualism but only consecutive multilingualism—one language after another—at a given time in a given location. However, we also acknowledge that this parent's viewpoint is no doubt also shaped by their experiences of education and their hopes and aspirations for their child in this monolingualizing context.

Each of the above excerpts reflects the monolingualized language-in-education policy present across the three countries. Languages are viewed as separate, bounded entities, and there are clear distinctions made between different spaces that students inhabit—be that individual lessons in school or between the school and the home. What we see is that students' multilingual linguistic repertoires or lived multilingual realities are not welcomed or reflected in the learning environment. This is in contrast to an established body of research evidence that illustrates that students learn best using language practices that they are familiar with (see UNESCO, 2016). In the next section, we discuss the concept of translanguaging spaces and suggest how this could be used to establish more effective language use in education.

Translanguaging Spaces

Translanguaging spaces are defined as spaces that are "created by and for translanguaging practices" (Wei, 2018, p. 23). Not all educational spaces in which translanguaging occurs will necessarily be created both by and for translanguaging (Reilly, 2021), and both aspects should be considered when developing learning environments that provide the conditions and support for translanguaging practices to be welcomed and encouraged. In light of the boundaries discussed above, which we see being created through language-in-education policies, language practices in classrooms, and attitudes toward what languages should be used in school, we suggest that translanguaging spaces could provide a mechanism to dismantle, disrupt, or at least soften the restrictive boundaries that prevent learners from making use of their full linguistic repertoires in the classroom. Wei and Lin (2019, p. 212) state:

> *"When we talk about the classroom, we tend to have an immediate image of a confined physical space with specified and often hierarchical role sets and planned learning objectives and tasks. Translanguaging classroom discourse is not only about encouraging fluid multilingual practices within the limits and boundaries set up by these role sets, objectives and tasks, but to aim at challenging and transforming them."*

Introducing translanguaging spaces into education in the country contexts we have discussed would, in the first instance, allow students to draw on their whole linguistic repertoire to engage with their learning. It would also allow teachers to draw on their own repertoires in their teaching and not be restricted to keeping within the boundaries of an artificial monolingualism dictated by language-in-education policy. In this way, language practices that are more reflective of the lived multilingual reality of children, their wider linguistic practices, and their communities could be used in the education space.

Language-in-education policy also has to extend beyond the classroom and through the boundaries between language in order to consider the ways in which the other boundaries in educational spaces can be challenged and transformed. Translanguaging spaces should be introduced not just in the classroom but across curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment practices. Translanguaging spaces are present whether they are recognized and acknowledged or not. They should be built wherever possible.

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Endnotes

1. The Government of Botswana have recently begun implementing a new "Botswana Languages Policy in Education," which seeks to be more inclusive, introducing additional Botswanan languages as MOI at early stages of education.

2. Swahili here refers to the Swahili language, also known as Kiswahili. The various Bantu languages named in this article use different prefixes to indicate language. Hence, for simplicity and clarity, we are not using the prefixes when translating the names of languages into English.