

Peacebuilding through Language Mentorship in Rwandan Education:

Analysing Key Post-Genocide Challenges

Anastasie Uwababyeyi and Jean de Dieu Nkubito

About the authors

Anastasie Uwababyeyi is currently a lecturer at the University of Tourism, Technology and Business Studies, where she also serves as the languages coordinator. Her specialisation is in education and conflict resolution.

Jean de Dieu Nkubito is an assistant lecturer at the University of Rwanda, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Center for Language Enhancement. His research interests include English language teaching, family welfare and poverty alleviation policies.

Acknowledgments

This study has been realised owing to the support and funding from the Aegis programme for Research, Policy and Higher Education (RPHE) and the UK Department for International Development (DfID). We particularly express our gratitude to Dr Erasme Rwanamiza and Dr Phil Clark for their advice and review. We greatly appreciate any other assistance received throughout the research activities.

Disclaimer

The research was conducted independently by the authors. Accordingly, the views, opinions, and thoughts expressed in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Aegis Trust

All rights reserved

Executive Summary

- In 2008 French was replaced by English as the language of instruction from the fourth year of primary school in Rwandan education. The immediate change caused discomfort among francophone teachers who had no background in English, especially those teaching in primary schools.
- Undermining teachers' working environment through large-scale language change has had critical effects for teachers, students and the wider Rwandan society.
- In 2012 a School-Based Mentorship (SBM) program was established wherein local and regional mentors helped teachers to develop their English language skills. Mentors' support proved vital in bringing back teachers' confidence in classroom management and restoring positive attitudes in the teaching environment.
- Challenges hampering the return to a positive working environment through the mentorship program include: teachers' workload, a single class for all mentees, conflicting responsibilities between headteachers and mentors, limited number of mentors, holiday training centres in remote areas, and a lack of adequate materials.
- The Ministry of Education (MINEDUC), Rwanda Education Board (REB), school leaders, mentors and teachers should work hand in hand to fix observed gaps and overcome challenges for the success of the mentorship program.

Introduction

In 1995 the Government of Rwanda decided to create a ‘trilingual’ society, introducing English as an official language and medium of instruction in addition to Kinyarwanda and French.¹

Since 2008, the medium of instruction has shifted from French to English from the fourth year of primary school to tertiary level regardless of teachers’ and learners’ linguistic background.² The immediate change has posed problems for a country that was formerly francophone.³ Some teachers felt their job became too hard as they could not adequately communicate in their classes through the new medium of instruction, a language some of them had never used.⁴ This resulted in job insecurity, a guilty conscience for not performing as they should, as well as a latent fear of losing their job if the lack of proficiency in the new medium of instruction persists. The overall resulting embarrassment is therefore conceived as a threat to positive peace. In this context, positive peace is understood as an overarching framework that creates an optimal environment for human potential to flourish, promotes fair social conditions, reduces grievances and resolves any disagreement without the use of violence⁵. Therefore, the emerging situation brought about a need for peacebuilding within the teaching sector. In addition, overlooking positive peace in the teaching environment could have far-reaching repercussions for the wider society. Teachers determine education quality and play a key role as

agents of nation building, identity construction, peace and reconciliation⁶, and they are considered role models in society; hence their discomfort and failure to deliver could negatively affect the whole nation.

In 2012, MINEDUC launched the School-Based Mentorship (SBM) program wherein each mentor worked in two schools. Mentors were tasked to assist teachers and help them develop the English language fluency needed in their daily work. The program was also expected to create a safe and convenient working atmosphere for francophone teachers. According to respondents, the program has helped reduce the above described tension, and has played a role in restoring positive peace and peacebuilding at large despite some prevailing challenges.

SBM contribution to positive peace in Rwandan education sector

According to teachers and school leaders, before the mentorship program most teachers were confused and despondent as they struggled with the language in which they had to deliver the teaching content. Thus, one of the mentors’ tasks was to restore the lost hope and self-confidence and to reinstate positive peace in the teaching environment. The analysis of informants’ narratives indicates that the mentorship program helps teachers overcome the language barrier. The support manifests through collective face-to-face language teaching sessions, model lessons, lesson observation, and subsequent debriefing meetings. In addition, mentors help teachers design teaching aids and facilitate elaborate work schemes.

While teachers benefit from this mentorship much still needs to be done to fully restore positive peace as expressed by SBM key actors on the ground. Even though the majority of teachers affirmed that they had gained a lot from the mentorship, others indicated that more work is required. They argue that the mentorship program can lead to positive peace when

¹ -Kagwesagye, A.M. (2013). Coping with Learning through a Foreign Language in Higher Education in Rwanda. *Linköping Studies in Behavioural Science. No. 173*. Linköping: Linköping University

² MINEDUC, (2008). *Education sector strategic plan 2008-2012*. Kigali: Ministry of Education

³ Uwambayinema, E. (2013). Science Teachers’ Challenges Implementing Rwanda’s English as a Medium of Instruction Policy: A Case Study of Nyarugenge District Rural Secondary Schools. (Master’s Thesis). California: California State University.

⁴ Lulu, J. (2011). Rwanda: Shifting the country’s education curriculum from French to English persists with turbulence. *The Independent*. 14 October, 2011.

⁵ Barash, D. P. and Webel, C. P. (2002). *Peace and Conflict Studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

⁶ Sayed, Y. et al. (2016). Engaging Teachers in Peacebuilding in Rwanda and South Africa. [Research Project Proposal]. Sussex: University of Sussex

English knowledge increases and teachers feel free to speak English, which has not yet been fully achieved. This corroborates class observation outcomes where researchers realised that some teachers were unable to deliver their lessons in correct English and had to embarrassingly resort to Kinyarwanda, their mother tongue. Thus, teachers reiterated that mentors must work hard to help every trainee according to his/her level.

In short, the mentors' contribution to peace building resides in upgrading teachers' level of proficiency in English. Positive peace would therefore be attained as teachers gain self-confidence. The end result is not only teachers' inner peace and comfort with the English language, but also a broader increase in quality education. In fact, the latter is likely to be attained since there is a positive correlation between teachers' effectiveness and their mastery of the medium of instruction.

Regarding the influence of the mentors' origin on their contribution to teachers' positive peace, informants expressed mixed views. In fact, proponents of local mentors argued that they benefit more when working with someone who shared their mother tongue and blamed foreign mentors for their lack of awareness of Rwandan teachers' proficiency in English. These mentors were therefore reproached for focusing on advanced skills, which makes it difficult for teachers to follow. However, foreign mentors were backed by some Rwandan teachers for being more creative, more motivating, and even more cooperative than local mentors.

Through the above perspectives, we observed a striking pattern as informants narrated their stories. On the one hand, foreign mentors are more appreciated by younger teachers who, most of the time, had more advanced English language skills compared to informants with more or less advanced age. On the other hand, Rwandan mentors are most widely praised by older teachers because they often communicate in Kinyarwanda to understand one

another. This implies that all trainees' aspirations have not been catered for, as all school teachers are trained by a single individual in the same classroom while their language needs are different. However, while collecting data, we observed that all trainees were treated equally regardless of the discrepancy in their language proficiency levels. Thus, there may have been some teachers who, despite having undergone the mentorship program, are still in a difficult situation because they have not been adequately helped to run teaching activities in the English language. This situation may be a threat to positive peace given that these teachers cannot comfortably run their classes; hence they may still feel frustrated and worried about the quality of their teaching.

Challenges faced by SBM key actors

Challenges facing SBM actors include teachers' heavy workload. Teachers are busy in their own class from 7.00am to 5.00 pm. They subsequently have no spare time to attend the collective face-to-face training sessions with the mentor due to take place twice a week. In fact, some uncooperative school leaders refuse to provide the two hours for the training. In such a case, headteachers' excuse is sometimes that the training does not appear on the weekly teaching timetable. Thus, due to a hectic timetable, headteachers have to try their best to arrange for the requested two hours for teachers' training. However, this sometimes results in conflicts between the headteacher and teachers when they are required to attend training after 5.00 pm when they are exhausted after long teaching hours. These conflicts then spill over between teachers and the mentor when the latter behaves like a teaching inspector, rather than a language trainer.

Moreover, a single class for all learners regardless of their language proficiency level and conflicting responsibilities between mentors and headteachers are additional challenges facing SBM. Furthermore, a limited number of mentors, holiday training centres in remote areas, and insufficient teaching materials, among others, also undermine the mentorship

program.

In short, many challenges were highlighted as hindrances to teachers' positive peace attainment through the mentorship program. Below are recommendations to overcome the above-described challenges.

Strategies to overcome challenges in mentorship program

Recommendations are addressed to MINEDUC, REB, school leaders, mentors, as well as teachers.

MINEDUC and REB as national education authorities should change teachers' timetable and provide hours for face-to-face training sessions at school and during holidays. Further, English language modules should be prepared separately according to teachers' levels of English and relevant materials should be provided. The above education authorities should also look for means to provide incentives for teachers who perform best during training and in the classroom.

Additionally, teachers delivering the same subjects should be trained together to enable them learn subject-specific technical terms. Each mentor should take care of only one school. Moreover, mentors should be properly supervised and regularly monitored. Thus, stronger and well-organised supervision for mentors and their regular monitoring of trainers' activities would result in greater productivity and maximum benefit for trainees.

Meanwhile, headteachers should work closely with mentors to ensure clear communication and a constructive work atmosphere. Mentors should carry out their duties with clarity and focus, guided by goals to achieve within a specific period. Thus, mentors, as the main actors in teachers' mastery of the English language, supported by headteachers, can play a central role in promoting positive peace in the teaching environment.

As for teachers who benefit from mentors in their everyday activities, they should consider their mentors as supporters and helpful advisors. Furthermore, teachers who have not learnt English before are advised to practise English as much as they can, especially whenever they are with their mentor and thus improve their language proficiency.

Finally, further longitudinal research is required to better understand how the SBM program develops over time. Future studies should examine whether any amendments to the mentorship program have increased teachers' positive peace vis-à-vis the English language as a medium of instruction. Moreover, given that our study was only limited to the primary school level, further research should explore the effects of the mentorship program on teachers at the secondary school level. This should include a strong emphasis on the contribution of the SBM program to mentees' positive peace in their working environment. This can be achieved by examining current teachers' comfort with English as a medium of instruction compared to when they started engaging with this process.