Viewpoint

Repositioning Ghana Schools as English Language Learner Schools

Mark Taylor

American International College

1000 State St.

Springfield Ma 01139

Email: matay16@msn.com or mark.k.taylor@aic.edu

Phone: 413-433-1149

July 13, 2016

Abstract

Although English has traditionally been the only language of instruction in Ghana, most young children do not speak English at home. This paper argues that students' academic performance

might be improved if their native languages were also used in school. Such an approach offers benefits in areas such as classroom participation, engagement in learning, and the development of listening skills that improve comprehension. Various approaches to ELL can be applied in Ghana to improve students' English skills, such as content and language integrated learning, integrated content-based instruction, a focus on academic language proficiency, sheltered instruction, comprehensible input, learner-centered instruction, an integrated skills approach, cooperative learning, and teacher collaboration. ELL services should not be seen as a threat to English language acquisition in Ghana but an aid toward English language proficiency for all students.

English language learners (ELLs) are students unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non–English-speaking homes and backgrounds and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses (Kim, 2011). By that definition, nearly all students in Ghana are ELLs. This paper reviews the history of schooling in Ghana, the benefits of an ELL approach to schooling, and suggestions for implementation of an ELL approach.

The History and Structure of Schools in Ghana

The use of the English language as the medium of instruction in Ghanaian schools, especially at the lower basic elementary level, dates back hundreds of years when foreign missionary workers set up schools. With the inception of formal education came the use of English as a formal language, and the indigenous language was considered inappropriate for use as a teaching tool.

Although Ghana has several ethnic languages, its formal language is English. Ethnologists recently counted at least 79 different spoken languages and dialects in Ghana, with other language experts claiming that there are more than 100 different languages. The three major languages spoken, however, are Akan, Ewe, and Ga, but no part in Ghana is ethnically homogenous. This has led many to believe that the use of the English language came with the onset of formal education in Ghana. On the other hand, others believe that the use of the English language in Ghana came long before formal education. Some historians indicated the colonists exposed a selected few to the English language during colonial rule so they could act as interpreters for the colonial government. Some might argue that the training of interpreters was the beginning of British education in Ghana, and thus the introduction of the English language was for educational purposes.

The structural set up of formal education came later with English as the formal language. Although a formal state education structure was modeled after the British system, the structure has undergone a series of reforms since Ghana gained its independence in 1957. In the 1980s, further reforms brought the structure of the education system closer to an American model.

Ghana's educational system is highly centralized. The Ministry of Education and its agencies are responsible for the entire educational system in the country. A National Accreditation Board, which began in 1990, is in charge of accrediting programs in all national institutions. This does not affect the major universities, since institutions of higher learning have had a long existence. The board was particularly responsible for polytechnic and private universities, which were initiated in the country more recently.

Currently, Ghana has over 12,200 primary schools, over 5,500 junior secondary schools, 550 senior secondary schools, 21 training colleges, 18 technical institutions, two diploma-awarding institutions, five major universities, and several private universities serving a population of over 20 million. School enrollment totals almost 2 million: 1.3 million primary; 107,600 secondary; 489,000 middle; 21,280 technical; 11,300 teacher training; and 5,600 university. In the past decade, Ghana's spending on education has been between 28% and 40% of its annual budget. In contrast, at the time of independence in 1957, Ghana had only one university and a handful of secondary and primary schools. Thus, now most Ghanaians have relatively easy access to a good education, although that assumption can be easily disputed for various reasons.

Primary and middle school education are tuition-free and mandatory, but the schooling requirement is not enforced because there are not enough teachers and facilities to accommodate all the students. Students begin their 6-year primary education at age 6. Under educational

reforms implemented in 1987, students pass into a junior secondary school system for 3 years of academic training combined with technical and vocational training.

After basic school, pupils may enter senior secondary (or technical/vocational) schools for a 3-year course, which prepares them for university education. Students usually study a combination of three (in some cases, four) elective subjects and a number of core subjects. For example, a science student could study additional mathematics, chemistry, biology, and physics as his elective subjects. An arts student might study geography, economics, and literature as his elective subjects. In addition to the elective subjects, there are core subjects studied by all students. The core subjects include mathematics, English, and science.

Admission to universities is based on examinations following completion of the 3-year senior secondary course. Students who obtain an aggregate score of 6 (the highest score possible) to 18 on the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) are admitted to the university. Usually, the score is determined by aggregating students' grades in elective subjects, added to the aggregate score of their best core subjects, with scores in English and mathematics considered first. So an arts student who scores an "A" in geography, "B" in literature, and "C" in economics will have an aggregate score of 6 for electives (i.e., A = 1; B = 2, and C = 3; F (fail) = 6). The student's best core subjects are then added. If a student obtains a "B" in English, "C" in mathematics, and "A" in social studies, that student's best core aggregate will be 6. Therefore, the overall aggregate score will be 12, which qualifies for admission into a university.

At present, governmental policy states that English should be used as the medium of instruction beginning in first grade. The study of the Ghanaian language, which was previously mandatory at the senior secondary school (high school) level, was abandoned because it was

perceived to contribute to low proficiency in reading. Thus, English is the formal language in all schools, with the indigenous language considered inappropriate for school use (Owu-Ewie, 2006).

Arguments for Using the Home Language

By definition, most Ghanaian students are ELLs in that they speak a local dialect at home but English is the only mode of instruction in the schools (Nguyen, 2009). Research has shown that the use of a child's first language in education enhances linguistic, cognitive, and academic achievement (Baker, 2001; Owu-Ewie, 2006). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2010) reported that the loss of children's home language might result in the disruption of family communication patterns.

An experiment in bilingual education in Mozambique demonstrated that children benefited greatly from the use of the mother tongue in terms of classroom participation, self-confidence, bilingualism, and literacy in the second language (Kamwangamalu, 2004). Such findings may indicate that the poor academic performance in Ghanaian schools, especially in English proficiency, might be due to a lack of foundation in the child's local language for transfer to the second language (Owu-Ewie, 2006). In the early stages of school, most reading tasks are performed by listening and, as a result, children develop strong listening skills and tend to hold on to those skills even in the later stages of schooling. It is difficult for the Ghanaian child, who is not proficient in English to begin with, to develop such listening skills to aid in reading comprehension proficiency. In addition, young children lacking English language vocabulary can lose interest in education at a critical point of their life.

In Ghanaian society, children with English language as their first language fare better academically than students encountering English at the start of school. This is because the latter

group must overcome deficiencies in English while simultaneously maintaining academic progress with students already proficient in English, and many do not succeed (Fry, 2007). However, speaking a parent's native language other than English at home can have a positive effect on children's English literacy development, and bilingual language skills can positively affect children's educational achievement when the student's linguistic and cultural strengths are not overlooked. Current research indicates that speaking a native language at home in the elementary school years has positive effects on high school completion. Moreover, for non–English speakers, having been reclassified as English-fluent before sixth grade increases the probability of high school completion (Zarate and Pineda, 2014). Increased linguistic diversity also contributes to a country's global competiveness because it gives the country the ability to integrate culturally and economically.

Yet, the use of the indigenous Ghanaian language as a way to enhance educational success has been viewed unfavorably by many experts. In Ghana, lack of proficiency in reading has been erroneously attributed to constant use of the student's indigenous language. This has resulted in fewer educated Africans studying their indigenous languages in school. Africans studying indigenous languages beyond junior high school are seen as academically inept. For example, in 1994, the study of Ghanaian languages as a core subject in senior high school was abolished because it was perceived as contributing to the abysmal performance of students in reading and other courses that involve the use of reading comprehension (Edu-Buandoh, 2015).

Ghana is very concerned with the high failure rate in reading, especially at the elementary level. This concern led to the upgrade of all sectors of education. The educational investment produced high-quality educational facilities and instructors but has not yielded returns in high academic standards, as over 64% of all students read significantly below their grade level (Ghana

Education Service, 2010). This is because effective teaching is not enough for ELL students if their linguistic and cultural strengths are overlooked. Rather, educators must ensure that students receive a rigorous and equitable education by designing standards-based and content-rich lessons and activities that are developmentally appropriate based on students' English language proficiency levels. In this context, the strategy of inculcating the local language into the curriculum to enhance student achievement deserves a second look.

Effective Teaching Practices for ELLs in Ghana

Since Ghanaian students are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English because they often come from non–English-speaking homes and backgrounds, the educational system should be restructured to provide specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in academic courses.

Some educators have suggested that developing teachers' skills specific to ELL instruction is critical to reducing regression in academic performance created by Ghana's English-only policy (Echevarria and Graves, 2001). Others have also suggested that ELLs in Ghana need scaffolded instruction to facilitate their learning process (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) and flexible grouping structures to allow them to interact with peers and discuss content, problem solve situations, and complete projects (Reiss, 2008). This practice will move students progressively toward stronger understanding and, ultimately, greater independence in the instructional language.

To start with, identifying the home language of the student is critical in restructuring the English-only policy in Ghana. Most students in Ghana speak one or two of the numerous local dialects that have existed in the country for centuries. On the other hand, most Ghanaians at the top of the socioeconomic ladder speak only English at home. For these people, at least, English is a

more prestigious and, possibly, superior language to the Ghanaian languages. Experts say even such students can also develop stronger language skills with bilingual education. English language immersion at the onset of school will create an unjust educational system and put the indigenous language student at a disadvantage. Byrd-Blake and Hundley (2012) investigated several effective practices that will allow ELL students to succeed both linguistically and academically.

Teaching Language and Content

One way teachers can address the needs of ELLs in Ghana is by combining the teaching of language and content. One way to facilitate this is through *content and language integrated learning*. This model has become popular with learning a content area course through the students' home language (Shih, 2010). ELLs in Ghana need to acquire the English language, but they also need to understand academic concepts that will help them succeed in school. Children can grasp educational concepts better when they are discussed in the local dialect than when they are explained in English. In Ghana, the alphabetic principles during the earlier years of school could be explained in the local dialect while teaching the child the English alphabet. In an English-only policy, the teacher has to instruct in English regardless of students' dominant language. Some of the proponents of the English-only policy have argued that this approach forces children to learn English more quickly. However, Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) explained that ELL students in middle schools not dominant in the English language spent twice the time as their English-dominant counterparts doing basic academic work. This is because the lack of English language proficiency meant that students must learn the academic content in an unfamiliar language.

Another approach to teaching language through content is *integrated content-based instruction* (Herrera and Murry, 2011). Integrated content-based instruction integrates language

and content by providing students with authentic activities and real-life experiences that facilitate the use of academic language in relevant ways. Recent increased interest in integrated content-based instruction is due to new developments in second language acquisition theory, and to the need to provide equal educational opportunities to the growing number of immigrant children in the United States and other developing nations (Allen, 1990). This language development component distinguishes content-based from traditional language instruction. An integrated approach to content-based instruction derives learning objectives from the academic content, language content, and ongoing assessment of the student's language skills. To foster communication, much content-based language instruction should be activity centered. Implementation of this approach in Ghana should give attention to teaching concepts, computation, applications, and problem-solving. This will take into consideration the characteristics of the teacher, the learner, the setting, and the relevancy of the students' local dialect to the English language (Oxford, 2001).

Academic Language Proficiency

In addition, to do well academically, ELLs must develop both conversational and academic language proficiency in English (Goldenberg, 2008; Harper and de Jong, 2004). Academic language refers to the oral, auditory, visual, and written language proficiency required to learn effectively in school; it is the language that students need to follow instructions and to complete assignments and not necessarily the strict adherence to the English language required by the government for educational purposes (Cummins, 2008). Cummins (2008) argued that academic language should be the language of the school. The academic language can be any language that the student is comfortable with so as not to misinterpret the intentions of the teacher. By teaching the English language in combination with academic language, ELLs are

given the opportunity to develop the academic skills needed to move them to English language proficiency.

When developed properly, cognitive academic language proficiency will help ELLs come to terms with academic language and give them the ability to undertake standardized tests and other academic exams. However, developing cognitive academic language proficiency is a tedious process that takes several years (Freeman and Freeman, 2007). Since ELLs are already behind their English-speaking peers in academic work, this strategy does not seem to be a viable option. On the other hand, focusing on developing linguistic competence alone may put ELLs farther behind their peers, making it more difficult for them to catch up. Sheltered learning seems to be the most viable option to help ELLs understand instructions in English.

Sheltered Instruction

Sheltered instruction is an approach most educators use to integrate language and content instruction. Sheltered instruction is a set of teaching strategies, designed for teachers of academic content, that lower the linguistic demand of the lesson without compromising the integrity or rigor of the subject matter. The approach benefits ELL students in Ghana, as well as proficient English speakers with a variety of learning styles, because teachers adjust the language demands of the lesson in many ways, such as modifying speech rate and tone and using context clues and models extensively. The focus of sheltered instruction is safeguarding ELLs from negative affective factors that may interfere with their acquisition of English (Krashen, 1980). Since its inception, a series of variations have developed, such as content-based English language, specially designed academic instruction in English, and the sheltered instruction observation protocol, among others (Herrera and Murry, 2011). When teaching language through content, instruction should be organized around themes (Freeman and Freeman, 2007; Short and

Fitzsimmons, 2007). Freeman and Freeman (2007) explained that thematic instruction allows students to make connections between the different content areas and facilitates academic language development, which is repeated naturally. In addition, instruction for ELLs should have meaning and purpose. When ELLs in Ghana understand that the purpose of learning a new language is to communicate, students are more likely to complete the tasks presented in English successfully.

Ghanaian teachers must provide students with *comprehensible input*—a specialized instructional technique and methodology that makes content lucid to students at all English proficiency levels—when teaching English language through content by integrating a variety of sheltered strategies into their lessons. Sheltered instruction can be used to adapt instruction to the students' level of language proficiency when using English to teach content to ELLs in Ghana. As a result, instruction is made comprehensible, and academic language development is promoted (Echevarría et al., 2013). A wide variety of sheltered strategies—such as the use of visuals, manipulatives, speech adapted to the level of students' language proficiency, controlled vocabulary, and collaboration among students—can be used to enhance English language proficiency in Ghana (Echevarría et al., 2013).

Learner-Centered Instruction That Values Students' First Languages and Cultures

ELLs in Ghana need opportunities to use English in meaningful and relevant ways (Freeman and Freeman, 1998; Goldenberg, 2008). Using English as the only mode of instruction because it's the national language may create the perception that Ghanaians share similar values and customs. However, students in Ghana come from very diverse homes with different customs and values. Tapping students' backgrounds makes instruction relevant and learner-centered because it bridges gaps and makes the content more accessible. Also, in such a diverse culture,

not connecting the lesson to the students' cultural background might result in the loss of intergenerational wisdom, damage to individual and community esteem, and children's potential nonmastery of their home language or English. The lack of connection further complicates matters in a society that already perceives education as foreign to its culture.

Some researchers have stressed the importance of connecting instruction to students' prior experiences and background knowledge (Meltzer and Hamann, 2005). Most ELLs comprehend reading material better when the material has cultural relevance (Goldenberg, 2008). Such students receive clarity when materials of relevance are explained in their home language (Goldenberg, 2008).

Integration of the Four Language Skills

ELLs in Ghana should receive instruction that promotes the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English simultaneously (Short and Fitzsimmons, 2007), since the development of these skills is important for the acquisition of language. This approach is called the integrated skills approach and has become a dominant trend in teaching foreign language to students. Research shows that reading and writing skills support one another and that literacy is facilitated by oral language development (Short and Fitzsimmons, 2007). Su (2007) indicated that 90% of students who received integration of the four language skills recommended its continuous implementation and had a positive view of ELL instruction. ELLs in Ghana can acquire academic language when the instructional language in the classroom provides integrated opportunities to listen, speak, read, and write. Teachers in Ghana should develop their lessons in a way that allows students to understand the English text by listening, speaking, reading, and writing collaboratively. Collaborating on these integrated skills will stress the importance of the English language as a tool for communication. This emphasis will help students gain a true

picture of the complexity and richness of the English language and challenge them to interact in a natural setting. This will allow instructors to track progress in multiple skills at the same time.

Student Collaborative Learning

When students interact while learning English language in the classroom, they are given the opportunity to use English in meaningful and authentic ways (Goldenberg, 2008). Research studies have shown that group work contributes to raise the achievement level of ELLs when they collaborate on meaningful tasks (Aguirre-Muñoz and Amabisca, 2010). For example, Brooks and Thurston (2010) found that ELLs are more academically engaged in content area classrooms when they interact in small groups. Therefore, teachers of ELLs in Ghana should promote cooperative learning to enhance student success. Johnson et al. (1994) explained that cooperative learning has five essential elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, face-to-face interaction, and group processing. In cooperative learning tasks, students depend on each other to succeed while each group member is required to do his or her part and each student is held accountable for knowing all of the material.

Teacher Collaboration

ELLs benefit not only from collaborating among themselves, but also when their teachers collaborate in the planning and delivery of instruction. At the secondary level, when students have failed to make sufficient progress towards English language proficiency, collaboration among content-area teachers and reading teachers is imperative. Collaboration helps not only the ELL student but the teachers as well (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). For effective collaboration to occur, school administrators in Ghana must set the tone by understanding what it means to

teach ELLs to become proficient in English. At the secondary level, it might be beneficial to employ a local language teacher to help close the gap in the deficiency in English language acquisition.

Conclusion

Due to Ghana's heterogeneous culture, it is imperative for Ghana to have a national language to allow free communication without the hindrance of a language barrier. However, the methodology of achieving this goal should be modified. The policy of English as the only mode of instruction has been counterproductive and needs further investigation. With over 64% of Ghanaian students reading significantly below grade level, ELL services can inculcate the rich and diverse culture of Ghanaians into the learning process to enhance student progress. Not activating the student's cultural background in the quest for English language proficiency can lead to the loss of children's home language.

Researchers have come up with a variety of methods to help ELLs become proficient in reading. The use of the home language is an important factor in achieving this goal. Whatever the method of modifying the ELL curriculum in Ghana, the goal of these bilingual programs is for students to receive services in both their local dialect and English to make them proficient in the English language. The Ghanaian language and English language should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, but rather the Ghanaian language should be used as a resource to facilitate English language development in school children.

Funding/Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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