Practices of Teaching Reading in Ugandan Primary Schools: The Case of Luganda Local Language

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Abstract

This study examined the teaching and learning reading in Luganda lessons in lower primary classes. The objectives were to: examine teachers' preparation and conduct of Luganda reading classes; assess the pupils' reading practices; and analyse the challenges faced by teachers. A qualitative case study research design was used. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and observation. The sample comprised six teachers and three primary three classes. The findings revealed that most teachers did not prepare to teach their classes and were not trained in Luganda pedagogy. The pupils did not use appropriate reading practices. The recommendations were that stakeholders should provide the resources required for teaching reading in local languages. There should be pre-service and in-service training for primary Luganda teachers. The local languages training curriculum should also be updated by the National Curriculum Development Centre, and implemented. The Ministry of Education should also implement the local language education policy.
Keywords: reading, teaching practices, language policy, Luganda, thematic curriculum.

1.0   Introduction

Since the implementation of the *Uganda Government White Paper on Education* of 1992 in 2003, a lot has changed in the primary education sector in Uganda. Universal primary education (UPE) was introduced in 1997 (Government of Uganda, 1992). The government also implemented the thematic curriculum in 2007, which emphasises the use of local languages (LLs) as the medium of instruction at lower primary classes from primary one to primary three (Altinyelken, Moorcroft, & van der Draai, 2014; Namukwaya & Kibirige, 2014). One of the aims of introducing thematic curriculum was to improve on the literacy and numeracy levels of pupils at lower primary classes. However, the literacy level in both English and local languages, has been noted to be very low among school children (Busingy & Najjuma, 2015; UWEZO, 2011, 2013), with only 25% of the pupils enrolled in grade three possessing the required literacy skills, and trend of learner achievement has almost remained constant for the last three years. The pupils are struggling to learn how to read and write in local languages. Many of the children complete the primary school cycle without acquiring basic literacy skills. Children's failure to acquire the required skills calls for an investigation on how teachers are conducting the teaching of these basic skills.

During the time of colonial governance in Uganda, the colonial masters selected six regional local languages to be used in education in Uganda whereby Luganda language was selected for the central region (Altinyelken et al., 2014; Tembe & Norton, 2011). Consequently, Luganda language is the language used as the medium of instruction in the central region for all schools under the thematic curriculum program.

This study intends to contribute to the development of reading practices in Luganda language by exploring the gap that needs to be addressed in Ugandan primary schools where Luganda language is used as the medium of instruction in lower primary classes. The schools selected in this study were both government and private owned rural primary schools from central Uganda, because the thematic curriculum is mostly used in rural schools, although this has caused a lot of concern leading to some parents and schools opposing its implementation (Altinyelken et al., 2014).The researchers concentrated on pupils of primary three (P.3) because the story books available in the selected schools were mostly for this grade. This study was carried out between February and April, 2016. This period is for term one, and the themes (content) for primary three in

term one according to thematic curriculum are: our school and neighbourhood, our home and community, human body and health (NCDC, 2011). As such, all reading stories from the story books were supposed to rhyme with the themes for term one. Therefore, the main concern was to look at how teachers were managing reading classes in line with the themes for the term. The study was guided by three research questions:

1. How do teachers prepare and conduct Luganda reading lessons?
2. What are the pupils' Luganda reading practices during the lessons?
3. What are the challenges faced by teachers during the process of teaching and learning reading in Luganda lessons?

This paper first presents literature on lower primary curriculum in relation to reading in local languages especially Luganda. Then the paper covers teacher's preparation and conduction of a reading lesson. This is followed by unfolding the study design and methodology. After, methodology, the findings are presented, analysed and discussed. Lastly, the conclusions and recommendations that can lead to better practices in teaching reading in local languages at lower primary school level are presented.

2.0   Thematic Curriculum and Reading

As a way of implementing the recommendations of the *Government White Paper* (1992) on education in Uganda, the Ministry of Education and Sports embarked on the primary curriculum review. The Minister of Education appointed a task force chaired by Mr. Basil P. Kiwanuka to review the aims of primary education in Uganda (Nankindu, 2014). The Ministry of Education and Sports, through the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) based on the report of the task force and updated the primary school curriculum. After several reviews (in 1999, 2000 and 2001), the NCDC introduced the outcomes based education (OBE) which aims at outcomes at the end of every learning activity. The NCDC introduced OBE in order to improve on the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values attained by learners (NCDC, 2011).

The OBE led to the development and implementation of the thematic curriculum in phases, from 2007 for primary one up to 2010 for primary four (Ssentanda, 2014). The thematic curriculum is based on five pillars which the developers found to be paramount. These pillars are: the use of themes that interest children, use of local language as a medium of instruction in lower primary classes, use of non-text book materials, continuous assessment of learners' achievements and the class-teacher system (NCDC, 2006a, 2006b).

Unlike the old subject based curriculum, in the new thematic curriculum, teaching is organised into twelve themes per class. The themes for primary three which was the class selected in this study were as follows:

1. Our sub-county/division
2. Livelihood in our sub-county/division
3. Our environment in our sub-county/division
4. Environment and weather in our sub-county/division
5. Living things: plants in our sub-county/division
6. Living things: animals in our sub-county/division
7. Managing resources in our sub-county/division
8. Keeping peace in our sub-county/division
9. Culture and gender in our sub-county/division
10 . Health in our sub-county/division
11. Basic technology in our sub-county/division
12. Energy in our sub-county/division (NCDC, 2016).

The twelve themes listed above cover up the whole academic year for primary three. There are three terms in an academic year, which implies that the teacher must ensure that four themes are covered every term.

Under thematic curriculum, lower primary classes cover reading lessons in the literacy hour (Ssentanda, 2014). During this hour, learners' language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are catered for. It is believed that this hour improves pupils' essential elements of literacy which are sound, structure and meaning of words (Ecalle, et al., 2015). Therefore, during preparation for Luganda reading lessons, the teacher must put into consideration how to achieve those literacy elements by the end of every learning activity.

During a reading lesson in a primary three class, the teacher should focus on pupils' acquisition of the four basic language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, by designing learner-centred activities aimed at engaging the pupils throughout the reading lesson. These activities help the pupils to acquire appropriate language to use in real life situations such as greetings, making requests, extending invitations, hence ensuring effective communication (NCDC, 2016).

3.0   Teacher Preparation and Conduct of a Reading Lesson

A number of studies stress that the success of language and reading lessons depends on effective preparation by the teacher. Norton (2013) and Ssentanda (2014) observe that the teacher's language practices in the classroom may not be consistent with the pupil's expectations. In order for the teacher to cater for the pupil's language and reading expectations, he or she must prepare the lesson well, together with the required instructional materials. The above observation is supported by findings of the study carried out by Ecalle, et al. (2015) about evidence based literacy practices (EBLP) proposed by language teachers in that study. The researchers observed that teacher's actions and instructional materials presented before the start of the formal reading instruction proved to be a valuable pedagogical tool in preparing children for acquisition of reading skills. Under the thematic curriculum, the teacher is expected to influence the pupil's acquisition of reading skills by using relevant instruction materials (Kyeyune, et al., 2011). Therefore, effective reading instruction can be achieved if the teacher has prepared the lessons well. Teacher preparation depends on the teacher's pedagogical orientations. This orientation influences the approaches adopted by the teacher to take on the pupils in discussions about a given text (Maine & Hofmann, 2015). However, these pedagogical orientations need continuous check-ups due to the education policies and practices that change every now and then.

One way how continuous check-ups can be achieved is to provide teachers with space for self-reflection and self-reflexivity and the best places to provide such space are the schools themselves (Khau, De-Lange, & Athiemoolam, 2013). In this perspective, although primary school teachers in Uganda are prepared through pedagogical training that is believed to enable them carry out effective reading, through proper preparation of pre-reading, reading and post-reading stages in a lesson, it is paramount to create space for them for self-reflection and self-reflexivity. When primary school teachers reflect on their professional expectations, then their preparation for conducting reading lessons becomes successful.

During the preparation stage, a teacher is expected to think of the different classroom activities that will facilitate the reading lesson. Such activities my include but are not limited to, role play, language games, dialogue, reciting poems, impromptu speeches, discussions and debates (Ngaka & Masaazi, 2015). Such preparation helps a teacher to have an effective reading lesson. It is during this pre-active stage, through lesson planning, that the teacher sets lesson objectives, reading

and after reading tasks, and also thinks of how all these would be achieved (Kim & Viesca, 2016). This is a very important stage because it determines the success or the failure of the lesson.

After proper lesson preparation, the teacher proceeds to class for active presentation of the lesson. The way the teacher conducts a reading lesson has a very high impact on pupils' achievement. Akyeampong, Lussier, Pryor, and Westbrook (2013) observe that during the presentation of a reading lesson, the teacher is expected to cater for pupils' acquisition of the four basic language skills. This is through strategies like encouraging individual pupils to read for the rest of the class, reading aloud, applauding pupils after reading for the class, clarifying on the vocabulary in the text, encouraging pupils to write down the vocabulary and giving them other oral and written tasks, and other activities for example singing a song or reciting a poem (Ngaka & Masaazi, 2015).

4.0   Research Design

This study aimed at scaffolding the practices of teaching reading in Luganda language in primary schools in Uganda. A qualitative research design was employed in a naturalistic setting. Data was generated through multiple qualitative strategies which allowed rich descriptions of Luganda teachers' practices for teaching reading through textual descriptions of the phenomena (Amin, 2005; Sarantakos, 1997). The phenomenon was explored by examining how teachers practiced the teaching of reading, through their preparation and actual teaching.

4.1   Selection of Participants

Three primary schools were selected to represent the urban, semi-urban and rural areas of central Uganda. They were coded as follows:
1. The urban primary school – coded as UPS
2. The semi-urban primary school – coded as SUPS
3. The rural primary school – coded as RPS

To avoid issues of reading materials incongruity, participating schools were purposively selected. This was done basing on a project funded by International Reading Association (IRA), in which copies of a reader's book for primary three were donated. The IRA project was entitled "***Empowering the Ugandan Child through Reading***", and the readers' book title was "***Omuto Yiga***" loosely translated as "***Let the Young Read***" (Babirye, 2011). This heterogeneous sampling technique enabled the researchers to explore teachers' practices of teaching reading using the same reading material across participating schools (Dawson, 2009). From each school, two teachers were selected to participate in the study.

4.2   Data Collection

The data was collected using two qualitative research methods: in-class observation and semi-structured interviews.

4.2.1   In-class observation: The researchers participated in the everyday life of teachers teaching reading and recorded teachers' practices as observed. Observation is a method that is widely used in social and cultural anthropology, as well as sociology and education (Dawson, 2009). In order to obtain detailed descriptive accounts of teachers' practices of teaching reading, the researchers made in-situ field notes which they later expanded upon after each fieldwork encounter (Dawson, 2009; Jupp, 2006). Observation was supported by photographic and recorded material taken during each lesson.

4.2.2 Semi-structured interviews: Open ended interviews were conducted to dig deep into teachers' practices of teaching reading. These interviews are held on the same day of the reading lesson to enable teachers easily reflect on what transpired in the lesson (Jupp, 2006; Stake, 2010). The interview questions were asked in Luganda, the language of interest in this study. Some examples of the questions that guided the discussions during the interviews were:

1. What can you say about how you planed your lesson and how it actually proceeded?
2. What can you say about the different lesson tasks you carried out in class?
3. What do you take as positive and negative practices exercised during your reading lesson?
4. What can you say about your pupils' reading practices during the lesson?

This reflection on every lesson's experiences enabled the researchers and participating teachers to reflect meaningfully on their practices of teaching reading. The discussions during the interviews were recorded, and later on transcribed and translated.

4.3   Data Analysis

Data was analysed using thematic inductive analysis (Dawson, 2009) whereby the themes considered emerged from the data which was analysed concurrently as it was being collected. This enabled the researchers to familiarize themselves with the data through verbatim transcriptions from the semi-structured interviews and in-class observation (Patton, 2002), to generate the findings. Basing on the analysis of the findings, conclusions were drawn and recommendations made.

5.0   Ethical Considerations

For issues of ethical considerations, researchers sought permission from the District Education Officer (DEO) for each participating school. DEOs are the Ministry of Education and Sports representatives in charge of all primary related education issues in their respective districts. The researchers then proceeded and requested the respective school administrations for permission to conduct the study which was granted by the headteachers of the three schools. The individual teachers who participated in the study were also requested to sign a participant consent form. For anonymity and confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. This was very much welcomed by the participants and it helped them freely participate throughout the study.

6.0   Findings

In line with the research questions, three themes were identified on which the findings were based:

1. Teachers' preparation and delivery of Luganda reading lessons
2. Pupils' Luganda reading practices during the lesson
3. Challenges faced by teachers during the process of teaching and learning Luganda reading
a) **Teachers' preparation and delivery in Luganda reading lessons**

Figure 1: The Cover Page of *Omuto Yiga* (Babirye, 2011)
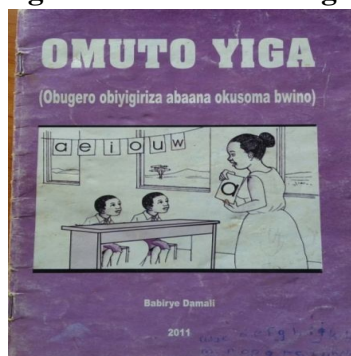
As indicated earlier, six teachers from three schools participated in this study. Two were selected from an urban primary school (UPS), two from semi-urban primary school (SUPS) and two from a rural primary school (RPS). Teachers from UPS prepared their teaching depending on two or more readers' books, while teachers from SUPS and RS depended only on one readers' book entitled, *Omuto Yiga* presented in figure 1.

Although all the six teachers prepared their Luganda reading lessons depending on one uniform story running from page 6 to page 8 of the

story book *Omuto Yiga,* teachers from UPS had prepared their lessons better than the teachers from SUPS and RPS. Whereas the former had lesson plans and schemes of work for the lesson, the later only had the story books.

During active Luganda reading lessons, all teachers gave their pupils a chance of reading the story. All pupils were very eager to be selected to read the story. All the participating teachers selected one pupil to read for the rest. As the selected pupil read the story, the teacher interjected especially where the pupil encountered challenges. One teacher from SUPS stopped her pupil in the middle of the story and she read it herself. It was also observed that the participating teachers never gave other pupils an opportunity to share reading the story.

Figure 2: One of the Reading Lessons from *Omuto Yiga* (Babirye, 2011)

Both teachers from UPS and one teacher from SUPS had pre-set questions for pupils to answer after reading the story. Those from RPS and one from SUPS randomly asked questions from the story as they wished. As a result, teachers who had pre-set questions were better prepared and their questions flowed chronologically from the beginning to the end of the story unlike the questions of their counterparts which were randomly set from various parts of the story. All teachers motivated their pupils as they answered the questions. The motivation encouraged pupils to be active throughout the lesson.

After the lesson, teachers were encouraged to comment on what transpired in their respective lessons. It was reported by all the six participants that they were using their skills of teaching reading in English to teach reading in Luganda lessons. They confirmed that they never had any training in teaching local languages at the PTCs. Actually two teachers, one from UPS and another from SUPS disclosed that even during their high school they never offered Luganda as a subject. So, they were assigned teaching Luganda simply because they were Baganda (*Luganda is the indigenous language of the Baganda*) by tribe. From the interviews, one of the participants said that:

> "*Munnange bwe tuva mu college, batugaba ku masomero. Ku ssomero omukulu w'essomero kyonna ky'akugamba okusomesa olina kukikkiriza. H/M namugamba nti saasoma Luganda n'antegeeza nti bwe mba nasoma Olungereza, n'oluganda nina okulusomes. Era ngenze ndweyigira mpola okulusoma n'okuluwandiika.*"

Loosely translated as:

> "*..My friend, I never learnt Luganda but the head teacher told me that if I studied English language at college, I can as well teach Luganda because they are both languages. I have now taught myself reading and writing Luganda.*"

Such a response manifests evidence that many primary school teachers teach Luganda language without any training background. Moreover, even those who have a background of learning Luganda language did so at high school not their respective PTCs.

In addition to the above, all the participants were impressed by their pupils' participation in the lessons. Both teachers and pupils enjoyed learning reading in Luganda. This could be due to the fact that Luganda is their mother tongue, a factor that enables them to follow the lesson eagerly up to the end. However, it could be the same factor that makes teachers and school administrators to

take the teaching of Luganda for granted, hence not facilitating the subject and attempting to teach it without any preparation.

b) Pupils' reading practices in Luganda lessons

As indicated under the research design sub-section, the story considered throughout all the lessons for the three schools that participated was on pages 6-8 of *Omuto Yiga*, a story by Babirye, (2011). This enabled the researchers to observe and assess teachers' practices of teaching reading heterogeneously. This story is presented in figure 3 below.

Figure 3 The Story from *Omuto Yiga* (Babirye, 2011).
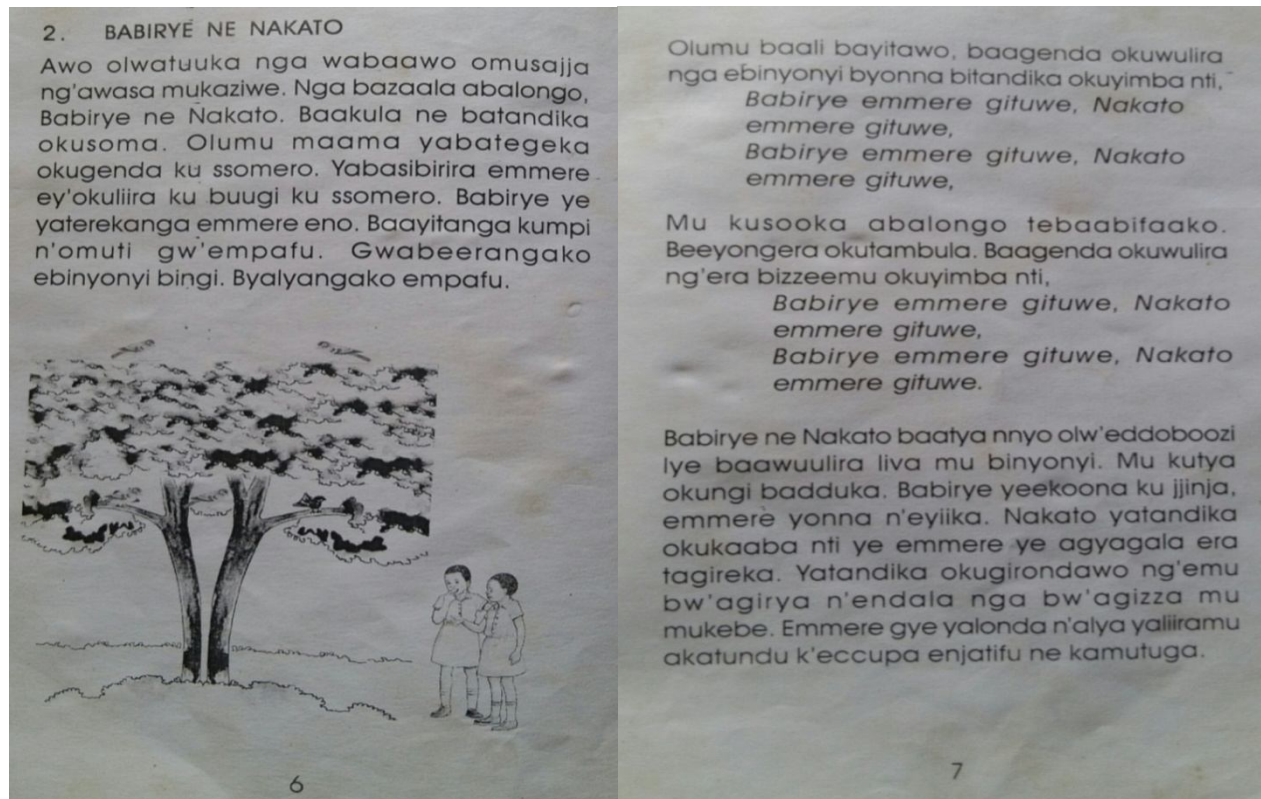
Almost all pupils from the participating schools exhibited the same practices of reading Luagnda.

i) All pupils had the story books before them and the teachers selected volunteers to read for the class. Although they all had story books, they seemed to listen and follow what the pupil selected was reading. They proved to be good listeners because after the story, they were able to answer most of the questions asked by their teachers.

ii) They started with less difficulty in reading, which increased as they continued. This could have been as a result of either the length of the story or lack of practice in reading Luganda.

iii) The pupils were very comfortable while reading mono-syllable and duo-syllable words, but to many, poly-syllable words were a challenge to them. This is where teachers always interjected.

iv) Syllables that were of more than two letters (for example CCV-jja, -nnya, mme-, -bwa, CVV-baa, gaa-, CCVV-ŋŋaa-) were hard for the pupils to read. This manifested lack of reading skills. As noted earlier and confirmed by the participating teachers, the teaching of Luganda as a language is misunderstood and underrated in many schools, especially the UPS and SUPS.

v) The pupils from RPS could read better than their counterparts from UPS and SUPS. This was due to the fact that teachers from UPS and SUPS interjected more than the teachers from the RPS.

c) Challenges faced by teachers in Luganda reading lessons

The six teachers interviewed pointed out the following challenges they face during the process of teaching and learning Luganda.

i) They all revealed that they lack training in teaching Luganda language. Although they have training teaching English, this is not enough for them to teach Luganda, because these are two different languages, with different cultures thus require different approaches.

ii) There is a negative attitude towards Luganda in schools and by parents whereby most teachers and school administrators take Luganda to be of little value to learners. This was confirmed by the school timetables, whereby the UPS and SUPS never included Luganda on their timetables. The RPS had the subject on their timetables but rarely taught it.

iii) In the UPS there was no single Luganda wall chart in the classes we visited. There were some Luganda charts in the SUPS and RPS. They had the names of months and the days of the week in Luganda. Teachers revealed that they lack guide books to assist them in producing classroom materials in Luganda language.

iv) There was a challenge of large classes mostly in the SUPS and RPS with more than 50 pupils in primary three! Although each pupil had a readers' book at hand, being too many in class was a challenge mentioned by the participating teachers. One participant had the following to say:

> *"Oluusi mba njagala okuyamba abayizi bange okuyiga okusoma Oluganda, naye obungi bwabwe bunnemesa! Nnemererwa n'okwewagaanya okutuuka emabega w'ekibiina! Awo mmaliriza nfudde ku abo abatuula mu maaso!"*

This can be translated as:

> *"In most cases I want to assist my pupils learn to read Luganda but I am constrained by their big number in class! I fail to squeeze myself to the back of the class and I end up concentrating only on those sitting in front."*

v) There was the challenge of unrealistic school policies. All the six participants revealed that their schools regulations prohibit pupils from speaking Luganda and other local languages on the school compound! Breaching this rule is punishable! So, teachers find it challenging to encourage learners to learn a language which is not supported by school rules and regulations.

vi) In addition, there was the challenge of unrealistic government policies on local languages at primary school level. Participants stated that the policy of having local languages optional after primary three and not examinable at primary seven (PLE) de-motivates them a lot. They stated clearly that it does not make any meaning to struggle with a subject that dies out after three years primary education.

vii) Lack of story books, text books and other books for teaching Luganda at primary school level. Participants mostly from SUPS and RPS revealed that had it not been the IRA's donation of the readers' books, they never had any single Luganda story book in their libraries!

viii) Participants also revealed that most of the stories in the donated story book were not in line with the themes and expected outcomes of the reading lessons. Some had very long words while others had very long sentences. One participant from SUPS also reported that the story book was not in line with the themes for primary three classes. The participant said that whereas story one talks about our community, that theme is for term three not term one. This made teachers to teach the stories selectively but not concurrently.

7.0 Discussion and Conclusion

According to how all participants prepared and delivered their Luganda reading lessons, it was evident that they lacked the basic pedagogical skills of teaching reading in Luganda classes. Teachers were expected to be aware that there are other additional skills on which reading builds (Ryner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, & Seidenberg, 2001). The additional skills may include, but not limited to training pupils basic Luganda orthography and phonology, morphology and syntax. They would do this in regard to the depth recommended at that level. Due to lack of these skills, participants taught reading in Luganda basing on unrealistic assumptions.

However, it should also be noted that primary teachers in Uganda, as revealed by all the participants, do not get the required pedagogical, methodological and content training required for teaching local languages at the PTCs. They only get training for English language, and they are expected to transfer that knowledge to teach local languages (Kyeyune et al., 2011; Ssentanda, 2014). If this is what is recommended during training in PTCs, many teachers cannot competently transfer the knowledge meant for English language teaching to local languages. This calls for re-visitation of the PTC language education curriculum to improve the teaching of local languages.

Practices that were exhibited by pupils during the Luganda reading lessons were a clear indication of the teachers' deficiency. Therefore, if the anomalies indicated above could be fixed, then the reading practices of pupils will also improve. But it should also be noted that full participation of pupils in class was a manifestation of how learners at lower primary enjoy learning their indigenous languages.

Challenges that were stated by teachers are not far different from those faced by the implementation of the thematic curriculum at lower primary level (Altinyelken et al., 2014; Jones, 2015; Ssentanda, 2014; Tembe & Norton, 2011). The moment teachers are equipped with the required skills and schools availed with the required teaching and learning materials for local languages, then there will be hope for improvement in teaching reading in local languages. Once well equipped, teachers will be capable of creating reading corners in their classrooms, hence creating an advantageous local languages reading environment.

In conclusion therefore, the Ministry of Education and Sports needs to overhaul the languages curriculum for PTCs, to incorporate the local languages pedagogy. There is need to organise in-service training courses for teaching local languages. Lastly, as Ssentanda (2014) notes, there is need to carry out more classroom-based studies on local language instruction so as to inform the powers that be about the need and urgency of empowering and using local languages in our education system.

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