

Refugee REACH ROUNDS Harvard Graduate School of Education

Language of Instruction in Refugee Education ¹

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Photo credit: Celia Reddick

Refugee REACH ROUNDS aim to foster discussions on common dilemmas of practice experienced by researchers, policymakers, and educators working in settings of migration and displacement. Our hope is that through dialogue and debate on really challenging questions and dilemmas in our field, together we can advance our collective understanding and find ways to promote quality education and welcoming communities for all in settings of migration and displacement. Please read more about our work at www.reach.gse.harvard.edu

Dilemma Definition: Language for an Unknowable Future

Refugee children must navigate many languages including those encountered before displacement, in the host country, and during a possible return or onward migration. Research is clear that children are best able to develop necessary reading skills when they do so in a language they know well and are supported to transfer those skills to other languages of instruction as they progress through school.² Yet outside their home countries, refugee children rarely encounter their home languages in school, given constraints on resources, lack of teachers with relevant language skills, and historical and political tensions around languages.

Refugee children also face “unknowable futures,” not knowing whether their futures will involve remaining in the host country, returning to the home country, continued migration, ongoing transnationalism, or some combination of these trajectories.³ They cannot predict what languages they will need for further learning, wellbeing, and opportunity.

What principles do you think should guide decision-making about language of instruction for refugees?

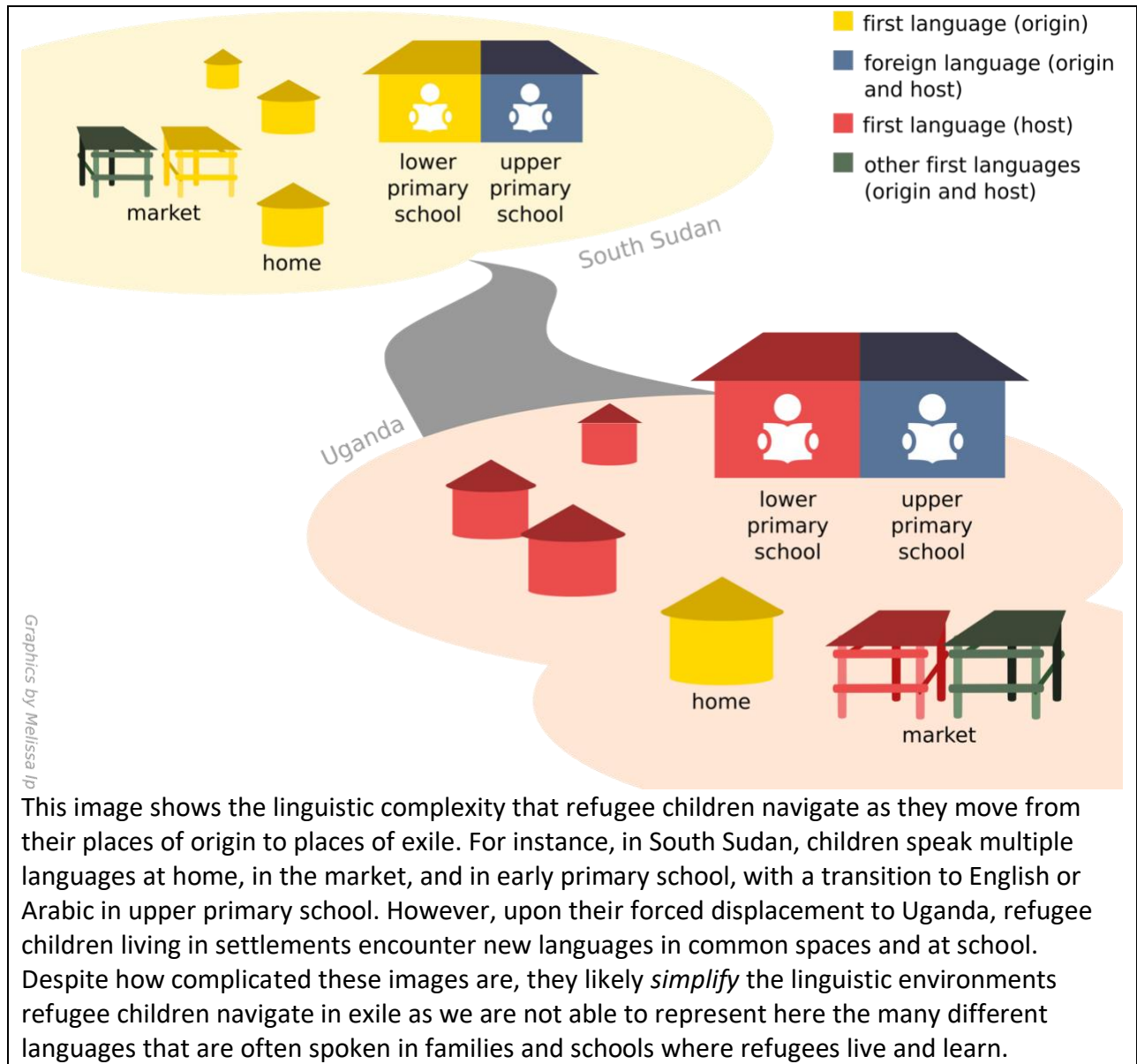


Dilemma in Practice

A student named John, the name he goes by at school, speaks Bari at home and in the market in South Sudan and has learned Arabic and some English in upper primary school. His younger sister, Milly, speaks Bari at home and in the market as well, and, according to South Sudan’s national policy, also in her Primary 3 classroom.

John and Milly are displaced from South Sudan by conflict and flee with their aunt to a refugee settlement in Uganda, where their linguistic context changes considerably. In Uganda, at home, they speak some Bari but, through their interactions in the market and with other South Sudanese and Ugandan friends at school, they are also exposed to Aringa and other Ugandan languages as well as English in the broader community. They begin to use these languages at home too.

John and Milly both enter schools in rural settlements in Uganda where English is used as the language of instruction, a language to which they have had little exposure. School is very difficult: John is able to learn enough English to stay in school, building on the reading skills he developed in Bari and the little English he learned in South Sudan. Milly never learned to read in Bari and is now confronted with schooling in English, a language she does not understand, and feels she has no choice but to drop out of school.





From the Research:

Home languages are vital for developing early reading skills

To learn to read, children draw on early oral language skills as they develop the understanding that sounds are represented by letters, which combine to form words. These foundational literacy skills—best developed in a language young children hear around them and speak well—can then later be transferred to other languages children may want or need to learn for school, like English.⁴

Children who are required to attend school in unfamiliar languages in the early years of schooling before developing these foundational skills struggle to learn to read, engage actively in class, and develop higher order thinking skills necessary in later grades of school.⁵ They are also at a greater risk of dropping out than those whose schooling takes place in languages they know well,⁶ as has been documented among Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon.⁷



From the Research:

Home languages are central to identity and belonging

Using familiar home languages at school can support positive self-identity for young people. Although many parents from marginalized backgrounds prefer that their children attend school in dominant languages like English given their status and prestige,⁸ families and scholars alike point to the gulf that can arise between children and family members as children's language skills shift away from the home language toward the language of school.⁹

wa Thiong'o describes the experience of leaving his Gikuyu-speaking community in Kenya and entering an English-only school where his home language was stigmatized and undervalued,¹⁰ an experience that is common in multilingual settings and can be detrimental for children's sense of identity and belonging,¹¹ Emerging research reveals that refugee children in Uganda are often punished for using their home languages at school and question whether they still belong in the countries where they were born as they slowly lose the ability to use and understand their home languages.¹² If language submersion in exile means refugee children lose the languages they once spoke in their places of origin, this may undermine relationships with family left behind and a pathway to a possible return.¹³



From the Research:

Integrating refugees into national schools supports educational opportunity

The current global approach to refugee education centers on the inclusion of refugee learners into national education systems.¹⁴ The push for inclusion comes as a response to poor educational access, quality, and outcomes, and limitations regarding certification for refugee learners who have traditionally been segregated in parallel education systems. Including refugee students in national schools can improve refugees' educational access and quality and is more sustainable as it does not rely on donor commitments to a parallel education system.¹⁵

The former approach to education for refugees also meant that children were educated in their own languages with an eye to eventual return, but with few opportunities for integration into the host society or school system.¹⁶ In contrast, refugee children who attend national schools in exile may benefit from aspects of this integration but are likely to be “submerged” in languages they do not understand, as John and Milly were, struggling to find a foothold for learning.¹⁷



From the Research:

Refugee children and families need both international and home languages

For refugee children to integrate into national schools and progress through school systems through required exams, they need to master the language of instruction, often an international language like English or French. But simply jumping into schooling in an unfamiliar language without a firm literacy foundation in one's home language and a bridge into the new language can drive poor academic outcomes for refugee children.¹⁸

Research demonstrates the importance of providing early opportunities for children to develop literacy in a familiar language, skills which they then transfer into a foreign language like English. We also know that there are significant benefits to children's learning and wellbeing when multilingualism is embraced in educational settings and children are not forced to contend with an unfamiliar language without the full repertoire of linguistic skills they bring to school.¹⁹

Of course, there are considerable challenges to language policies and practices that support learning in multiple languages. The practicalities of implementing multilingual language policies, including ensuring that teachers are sufficiently trained and that learning materials are

available can be quite expensive and challenging for national education systems.²⁰ Additionally, language-in-education policies that affirm and integrate children’s diverse languages can support student wellbeing²¹, but if implemented unsuccessfully, can also be drivers of conflict.²²



Dilemma Revisited: Dilemma in Practice

Rachel is a 5th grade student at Mary Magdalene Primary School in Kampala, Uganda. She has been there three years, the only child chosen among her siblings to travel from Kakwa, Sudan to Kampala, Uganda with her uncle in search of educational opportunities. Rachel has a single-minded focus on her education, through which she hopes to “be able to help our parents,” who are subsistence farmers in Kakwa. She knows that a big part of that wished-for future hinges on learning English.

Even though teachers and students are expected to use English at school, fellow Sudanese and South Sudanese students sometimes slip into Arabic or other shared languages and Rachel is sure to remind them that “this is a school. They [your family] brought you to learn English.” Her focus on English persists at home, too. “Even at home I don’t speak Arabic, even my language [Kakwa] I don’t speak because...I want to know more things and more English than this one which I’m speaking. When my cousins talk to me in Arabic or Kakwa, I reply them in English.” Rachael is determined to learn enough English to excel in school, soar across borders as a pilot, and provide financial security for her family in Sudan.

Rachel has recently begun to realize that in her determined use of English, she has started to forget Arabic and Kakwa, the languages she used to use to communicate with her family back home. She rarely speaks the languages anymore, and she worries that, “I’m forgetting, and one day my uncle may say he’s taking me to see my mom. I don’t know which language will I use...I feel bad.” Rachel hopes that English will bring her a more secure future, but fears that the price may be weakening ties to her family that once felt so strong.

Emma is a 5th grade English and Social Studies teacher at Uganda City School, a school close to Rachel’s, where over 50% of the students are refugees. When Emma first joined the school two years ago, she was overwhelmed by the student body: many of the refugee children were overaged and seemed “wild” and “lonely” because of what they had experienced, fleeing violence in the countries where they were born. But Emma has come to understand that “they are not wild. At times it is even this part of language also, there is a way it also affects them,

because if someone cannot express him or herself properly,” they can become frustrated and even aggressive.

Knowing that the students are struggling with their new environment and with language, Emma tries many different teaching strategies: she places children in small groups to work together on exercises she sets for them, she encourages students who speak the same languages to translate for one another, and she even sometimes speaks Kiswahili with the students from the Democratic Republic of Congo, a language she grew up speaking in Uganda. She is able to do these things because the school principal, understands the importance of using home languages in the classroom, even if she asks for discretion because of the national policy requiring English in city schools. Most of the school year, Emma walk a fine line between creating an environment that centers on English and ensuring that students can learn new skills and content, using languages they understand to facilitate this development.

When it comes time for high stakes exams once a year, though, this balancing act is put on hold: “those children will be subjected to a national examination, and if the national examination dictates that it is English, still I have to bend to English,” Emma explains.

Emma navigates tensions between national policies, local needs, and the educational opportunities she strives to create for her students.



Questions to Consider Ahead of Discussion

- What are the main challenges in terms of language that students John, Milly, and Rachel face?
- What possibilities and constraints does Emma face as the educator responsible for students’ learning at school?
- What is the dilemma in terms of decision-making about language of instruction for refugees in host countries? Why is this a dilemma?
- What do you think should be done about this dilemma? What are possible approaches in the contexts in which you work?



Additional Resources

Reddick, C. & Dryden-Peterson, S. (forthcoming). Refugee Education and Medium of Instruction: Tensions in Theory, Policy and Practice. In C. Benson & K. Kosonen (Eds.), *Language Issues in Comparative Education: Policy and practice in multilingual education based on non-dominant languages*. Brill Publishers.

[Internationals Network for Public Schools](#) – This network of public schools for recent arrivals to the US provides teaching strategies, materials, and research for multilingual learning environments

[Bridging Centres in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement, Uganda](#) – Street Child and YARID, a refugee-led organization in Kampala, Uganda, are working together to provide a linguistic bridge into public schooling for refugee children

Notes

¹ This brief was written by Celia Reddick.

² Cummins, J. "Empirical and Theoretical Underpinnings of Bilingual Education." *The Journal of Education* 163, no. 1 (1981): 16-29; Cummins, J. *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Clevedon, 2000; Kerwin, J.T. and R. Thornton. "Making the Grade: Understanding What Works for Teaching Literacy in Rural Uganda." Population Studies Center: University of Michigan, 2015.

³ Dryden-Peterson, S. "Refugee Education: Education for an Unknowable Future." *Curriculum Inquiry* 47, no. 1 (2017): 14-24.

⁴ Cummins, J. "Empirical and Theoretical Underpinnings of Bilingual Education." *The Journal of Education* 163, no. 1 (1981): 16-29; Cummins, J. *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Clevedon, 2000; Trudell, B., P. Nannyombi, and L. Teera. "A Bridging Programme for Refugee Children in Uganda: Perspectives and Recommendations." Kampala, Uganda: Save the Children International / SIL Africa. Retrieved from: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/bridging-programme-refugee-children-uganda-perspectives-and-recommendations>

⁴ Cummins, J. "The Cognitive Development of Children in Immersion Programs." *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 34 (1978): 855-983; Hornberger, N., and J.K. Chick. "Co-Constructing School Safetime: Safetalk Practices in Peruvian and South African Classrooms." In *Voices of Authority: Education and Linguistic Difference* edited by M. Heller & M. Martin-James. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2001; Piper, B., L. Schroeder, and B. Trudell. "Oral Reading Fluency and Comprehension in Kenya: Reading Acquisition in a Multilingual Environment." *Journal of Research in Reading* 39, no. 2 (2016): 133-52.

⁶ Benson, C. "The Role of Language Instruction in Promoting Quality and Equity in Primary Education ". In *Lessons in Educational Equality*, edited by J. Heymann & A. Cassola, 191-221. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012.

⁷ UNHCR. "Five Challenges to Accessing Education for Syrian Refugee Children." In *Innovation Service*, edited by UNHCR's Learn Lab, 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/5-challenges-to-accessing-education-for-syrian-refugee-children/>

⁸ Trudell, B. "Local Community Perspectives and Language of Education in Sub-Saharan African Communities." *International Journal of Educational Development* 27, no. 5 (2007/09/01/ 2007): 552-63.

⁹ Cummins, J. *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Clevedon, 2000; Fishman, J. "Reversing Language Shift: Successes, Failures, Doubts, and Dilemmas." In *Language Conflict and*

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- Language Planning*, edited by E. Jahr and International Tromsø Symposium on Language. Berlin, 1993; wa Thiong'o, N. *Decolonising the Mind : The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: J. Currey, 1986.
- ¹⁰ wa Thiong'o, N. *Decolonising the Mind : The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: J. Currey, 1986.
- ¹¹ Anzaldúa, G. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 4 ed. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2007; Cummis, J. *Language, Power, and Pedagogy : Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Clevedon, 2000; Mulimbi, Bethany, and Sarah Dryden-Peterson. "Experiences of (Dis)Unity: Students' Negotiation of Ethnic and National Identities in Botswana Schools." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2019): 404-23; Valenzuela, A. *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- ¹² Reddick, C. *Language for an Unknowable Future: How language shapes the lives of refugee children*, in progress.
- ¹³ Reddick, C., and S. Dryden-Peterson. "Refugee Education and Medium of Instruction: Tensions in Theory, Policy and Practice." In *Language Issues in Comparative Education: Policy and Practice in Multilingual Education Based on Non-Dominant Languages*. Edited by C.; Benson and K. Kosonen: Brill Publishers, Forthcoming; Chopra, V., and S. Dryden-Peterson. "More Than Words: Language as a Tool to Move from Refugee to Returnee to Citizen in Burundi?". *Harvard Educational Press*, 2015.
- ¹⁴ Dryden-Peterson, S. "Refugee Education in Countries of First Asylum: Breaking Open the Black Box of Pre-Resettlement Experiences." *Theory and Research in Education* 14 (2016): 131-48.
- ¹⁵ UNESCO, UNHCR, and Global Monitoring Report. "No More Excuses: Provide Education to All Forcibly Displaced People." UNESCO, 2016. Retrieved from: <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/no-more-excuses>
- ¹⁶ Dryden-Peterson, S. "Civic Education and the Education of Refugees." *Intercultural Education* (2020): 1-15.
- ¹⁷ Benson, C. "Real and Potential Benefits of Bilingual Programs in Developing Countries." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 5 (2002): 303-17; Hicks, R., and L. Maina. "The Impact of Refugees on Schools in Uganda." In *Language for resilience*: British Council, 2018; Reddick, C., and S. Dryden-Peterson. "Refugee Education and Medium of Instruction: Tensions in Theory, Policy and Practice." In *Language Issues in Comparative Education: Policy and Practice in Multilingual Education Based on Non-Dominant Languages*. , edited by C.; Benson and K. Kosonen: Brill Publishers, Forthcoming.
- ¹⁸ Hicks, R., and L. Maina. "The Impact of Refugees on Schools in Uganda." In *Language for resilience*: British Council, 2018; Trudell, B., P. Nannyombi, and L. Teera. "A Bridging Programme for Refugee Children in Uganda: Perspectives and Recommendations." Kampala, Uganda: Save the Children International, 2019.
- ¹⁹ García, O., and L. Wei. *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillian UK, 2014.
- ²⁰ Altinyelken, Hulya Kosar. "Curriculum Change in Uganda: Teacher Perspectives on the New Thematic Curriculum." *International journal of educational development* 30, no. 2 (2010): 151-61; Piper, B., S. Zuilkowski, and S. Ong'ele. "Implementing Mother Tongue Instruction in the Real World: Results from a Medium-Scale Randomized Controlled Trial in Kenya." *Comparative Education Review* 60, no. 4 (2016): 776-807.
- ²¹ Lee, Jin Sook, and Debra Suarez. *A Synthesis of the Roles of Heritage Languages in the Lives of Children of Immigrants: What Educators Need to Know*. Bristol, England. 2009.
- ²² King, Elisabeth. *From Classrooms to Conflict in Rwanda*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013; Davis, Christina P. "Speaking Conflict: Ideological Barriers to Bilingual Policy Implementation in Civil War Sri Lanka." *Anthropology & education quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2015): 95-112.