

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the study by situating the research topic within its background and context, that is, the introduction of Wolof as a support language to instruction in English at the primary level in the Gambian education system. It describes current linguistic shortcomings in multilingual environments, the motivations for bilingual education and the potential of students' first Language as a pathway to enhance their academic achievement. This chapter concludes with a declaration of the research question, focusing on the teachers' perception and the objectives, scope, limitations and significance for educational policy and practice.

1.1 Background

Language is a key element to learning that it dictates the way in which students will access or understand curriculum content. This is even more critical in a multilingual setting like The Gambia, the vehicle language used could either facilitate or impede learners' learning. English is the medium of instruction, while many students speak Wolof, or other indigenous languages at home (Benson 2004; UNESCO 2021). This linguistic incommensurability presents difficulties, particularly in rural settings such as Ngayen Sanjal, as children struggle to shift from Wolof to English (Heugh, 2011).

The literature shows that pupils learn more effectively when they are taught in their first language at the early stages of education (Ball, 2010;

UNESCO, 2024). L1 provides a base from which learners can add further languages in that it supports students to understand and participate (Cummins, 2000; Krashen, 1989). This study explores the use of Wolof on English instruction and how it affects learning outcomes of students in the early grades.

Studies seem to indicate that when young learners are taught in their L1, or what linguists call mother tongue, they will likely perform better academically. Teach in a language that can act as a bridge to English proficiency in one which could aid understanding, foster engagement, and improve outcomes for students. This research investigates the use of Wolof in English instruction and its effect on the academic achievement of students.

UNESCO (2021, 2024) notes the significance of multilingual education in addressing these challenges and underscores its impact on learning achievements and inclusion. The research shows children who learn in their mother tongues are far more likely to succeed in school compared with those who are taught in an unknown language. In addition, the 2024 report highlights the educational challenges of refugee and other displaced populations and the millions of children who are inhibited by language and access.

In multilingual societies such as The Gambia, the introduction of local languages into school systems promotes inclusion and educational success (Ouane & Glanz, 2010). Local language of instruction not only improves education but also it establishes a sense of belonging for the children and develops the society. (UNESCO, 2023; Brock-Utne, 2001).

L1 integrated culturally relevant teaching fosters involvement, sense of self, and equity in education (Gay, 2010; García & Wei, 2014). According to a survey conducted by The Gambia Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (2020), an average of 65% of teachers in The Gambia feel inadequate in responding to the linguistic needs of students, thereby hindering teaching and learning. In the face of the challenge, a new realisation is being drawn toward the inclusion of Wolof in English teaching. The culturally responsive practice investigated in this study may help with student interest, understanding, and academic performance, which could contribute to educational equity and inclusion in multilingual contexts.

In Africa, the influence of indigenous languages on education has been the object of attention in some research. Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar (2010) examine the historical, political, including the relation to the School Language Policy, reasons behind how the few dominant and indigenous languages of the region became dominant and marginalised, respectively. They make the case for the value of linguistic variety and the right of children to learn in their first language. Moreover, a study by Ndione and Diallo (2017) and Sanneh (2015) offers examples of language policies in Senegal and The Gambia, respectively, drawing attention to the challenges of adopting and implementing multilingual educational programs in postcolonial societies.

1.2 Reasons for choosing this topic

Research indicates that educating children in their first language accelerates the acquisition of a second language. Researchers (Cummins, 2000;

Krashen, 1989) assert that cognitive development and academic achievement are clearly associated with the first language of the learner, especially in the first years of schooling. Teachers in Ngayen Sanjal think that by incorporating Wolof into the education system, they will be able to create a warm environment that can better facilitate the acquisition of English as a foreign language. The focus is on Wolof (L1) as a possible starting point for English instruction in Gambian primary schools. From my experience as a teacher in the elementary school. I consider L1 (Wolof) as an instrument that can easily bring up more sophisticated vocabulary and grammar in its own breast, which could eventually lead to better understanding and learning of English in a shorter period of time. It will respond to important questions regarding language pedagogy and the inclusion of culture in an educational context through exploring how L1 (Wolof) may serve as a bridge to language competence and proficiency in English.

There are compelling reasons that make it necessary to understand the impact of L1 (Wolof) in teaching the English language. The students' linguistic background can be valued and acknowledged as a first step towards strengthening their language and fostering a cultural sense of belonging and pride. It could also help to demystify the anxiety which students often feel during a transition to English-medium education; equally, it would promote linguistic inclusion, ensuring that all learners have a right to equitable access to quality pedagogy, regardless of language background.

1.3 Research question

The study addresses the following question.

- 1) How do teachers perceive Wolof as a medium of instruction in the English classroom?

1.4 Research Objective

Thus, the research examines teachers' perceptions of Wolof as a medium of instructions in the English classroom.

1.5 Clarification of Key Terms

To prevent misunderstanding of the terms employed, we define the following key terms:

- a) **Wolof** – This is a language used in The Gambia and some other countries in Africa, such as Senegal, Mali and Mauritania.
- b) **Facilitator** - Someone or something/which makes an action or process easy.
- c) **Ngayen Sajal Lower Basic School** – An Elementary school in rural Gambia introducing Wolof within English education for grades 1st, 2nd, and 3rd

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study holds considerable significance for several key stakeholders in the educational landscape of The Gambia and other multilingual contexts. For educators and school administrators, the findings highlight the practical benefits and challenges of incorporating Wolof, the students' first language, into English language instruction. Understanding teachers' perceptions helps in designing professional development programs that are tailored to their needs and realities.

For policy makers and curriculum developers, the research offers evidence-based insights into the role of mother tongue education, which may inform the development of inclusive language policies that support bilingual education in early grades. The results underline the need for strategic integration of local languages like Wolof to improve student engagement, cultural belonging, and academic achievement.

This study also contributes to the academic field of bilingual education by offering context-specific data from a rural Gambian school, which is often underrepresented in global research. It supports theories such as Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis and Krashen's Input Hypothesis by showing that L1 scaffolding can enhance L2 acquisition. Finally, the study serves as a reference for future researchers, providing a framework for further exploration into language policy, teacher training, and multilingual pedagogy in Africa and beyond.

1.7 Scope and limitations of the study

This research is on the use of L1 (Wolof) as an enhancement in Teaching the English Language (TEYL) at the lower basic school children (Grades 1-3) of Ngayen Sanjal Lower Basic School. This research is confined to Ngayen Sanjal Lower Basic School, Grades 1-3, The Gambia. The results of this study would not be representative of other schools in The Gambia, particularly those where Wolof is not commonly spoken.