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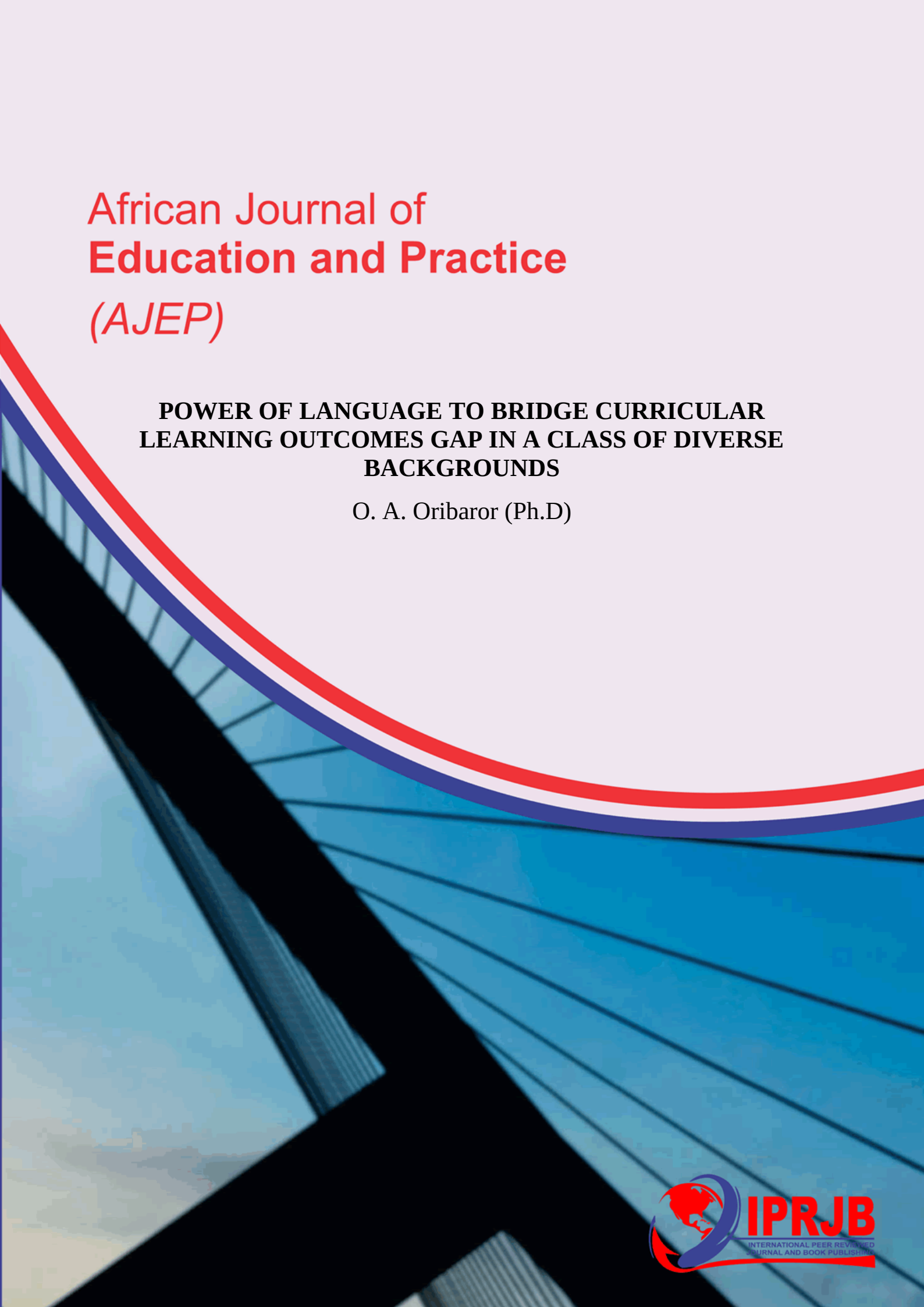

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Abstract

This paper examined the role language is capable of playing to promote learning in the classroom irrespective of the social background of the students. It explored the literature support for claims and counter-claims towards the use of language suitable for every student in the class in the process of curriculum implementation. The paper highlighted the nature of language, the use of language in the classroom and the skills needed by the teacher to effectively use language in the classroom.

Key words: *Language, bridge circular, learning outcomes, class*

Nature of Language

One of the features of educational discussion during the 1960s was the attention paid to language as a factor in educational achievement. This trend was due in part to belated recognition of the importance of such psychologists as Luria and Vygotsky, and also to the sociological theories of Bernstein. The Russian psychologists were responsible for refocusing attention onto the relation between language and thought. Luria, Vygotsky and others of the school held a dynamic view of language that is they maintained that language was not simply the outward manifestation of inner thinking, but that it shapes, makes possible and even produces some kinds of thought. This implies that the more that is known about an individual's or a group's language the more that is known about their thinking. The other way in which the Russian psychologists saw language dynamically was in the 'self-regulating' function of language: as we internalize language we internalize society; Luria (1959, 1961), has shown, for example, that children internalize language in such a way as to become self-regulating systems rather than the passive responders to stimuli suggested by Skinner (1957) and the behaviourists. Language is the uniquely human attribute which enables us to learn, think creatively and change our social environment. This is very different from animals with-out language who are much more dominated by their instincts and their physical surroundings.

The interests of sociologists in language are closely related to the Russian psychological view that man becomes human largely by means of the self-regulating system of language. In sociological terms this means that children are socialized largely by means of language, and also that human beings acquire the capacity for rebellion, or at least change, by means of language: language not only helps us to understand why things are as they are, it also enables

us to see what might be. An individual's view of reality is closely bound up with language: the language we have acquired has some influence on how we see the world, and how we use language is closely related to a position in the social structure. One of Bernstein's contributions was to illustrate the connection between social structure, language use and 'educability'. But his theory has been greatly misunderstood and misinterpreted: he was not suggesting that working-class language is inferior to middle-class language and that therefore working-class children are less educable; he was demonstrating that if middle- class children acquire the kind of oral expression classified as elaborated code this will give them an advantage in formal educational contexts, given the way that education is at present organized. The sociological interest in language is much wider than this, however. How people use language is related to social structure, occupation, community and group relations; how people think is related to their use of language. Debates have been on for so long concerning the relationship between language and social class particularly in the areas of applied linguistics and in sociolinguistics (Block 2014), ethnography of communication (Hymes 1996), language attitudes research (Chakrania & Huang 2014, Huygens & Vaughan 1983, Lai 2010).

Language and Education

The dangers of oversimplifying the relationship between language and social class and education are enormous. It is all too easy for teachers to label working-class pupils as 'restricted code users' and therefore difficult to teach or incapable of benefiting from normal educational processes. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that there is no evidence at all to support such attitudes. The reality is much more complex. Working-class people have traditionally had little part to play in the power structure; they have not used language to any great extent in their jobs, and they have not needed to use language to persuade or coerce others. That does not mean that language is unimportant in working-class culture: simply that its uses may differ in some respects from certain kinds of middle-class communities.

On the other hand schools are in origin middle-class institutions; teachers are by background or education middle class, and the language of transmission is also largely middle class. It is therefore not surprising that pupils whose home background has already equipped them with the appropriate kind of oral facility will find less difficulty in adapting to some of the demands of teachers in schools. There are, however, a number of difficulties or problems inherent in this kind of discussion about social class, language and education which teachers should be aware of. One of the difficulties in this area of socio-linguistic research is that some of Bernstein's early writings became very popular, especially in colleges of education, but they were frequently misunderstood or quoted out of context. Bantock (1968), for example, quoted Bernstein in support of his view that working-class children needed a different kind of non- literary education. A further difficulty is that this popularization occurred at an early stage in Bernstein's work: his later writings are much more complex and include important re-formulations of his earlier theory.

Bernstein's early work has also sometimes been interpreted in terms of what later came to be known as 'deficit theory'. This may never have been Bernstein's intention but some of the terminology used may have encouraged this misinterpretation. This oversimplified view may be summarized as follows: there are basically two kinds of speech or linguistic codes restricted and elaborated codes. Restricted code is used for communicating familiar ideas to people who can take a good deal of the message for granted; elaborated code is more

appropriate for communicating with strangers, conveying complicated and abstract ideas, signifying doubt and uncertainty and so on. Bernstein's early work contained the hypothesis that these two codes exist and that whereas middle-class people can switch from one code to another according to the context, lower working-class speakers tend to use only restricted code. All this kind of discussion was not very far away from 'deficit theories' and notions of 'linguistic deprivation'. As we have seen some writers, but not Bernstein himself, made this oversimplified connection.

In his later writings, however, Bernstein has been careful to point out both the complexity of the relation between language class and educability and also the dangers of developing programmes for compensatory education based on over- generalizations about working-class children. An extract from his essay 'A Critique of the Concept Compensatory Education' (Bernstein, 1967) may serve to put this part of the record straight.

The concept 'compensatory education' serves to direct attention away from the internal organization and the educational context of the school, and focus our attention on the families and the children. The concept compensatory education implies something is lacking in the family and so in the child.

There are two points which ought to be made in connection with this. First, there is no evidence to support the view that the working-class children are in any way linguistically deprived. Second, linguistic difference is not the same as language competence. Both of these points will be taken up later.

Linguistics Deprivation: Language and Dialect

One of the reactions to the 'linguistic deprivation' version of the deficit thesis was the assertion that any language and any dialect can express anything that needs to be communicated in any particular community. This was first put forward in general terms by cultural anthropologists and linguists, and then in a particular context by American socio-linguist, Labov, who turned the theory on its head and claimed that black children from the ghetto slums actually used a richer language. That is probably an extreme over-reaction to the deficit thesis, but what is now generally accepted by linguists is, first, that every language is adequate for the particular needs of any culture, and, second, that you can say anything in any language, but that it may be more difficult to convey certain ideas in some languages; this would apply also to dialects and other linguistic varieties.

This position paper is therefore an attempt to answer the question

What help does research offer to the teacher with children from working-class or non-standard English backgrounds with regards to certain linguistic measures?

Experience has shown that children who speak some kinds of non-standard English are not linguistically deprived: their language is perfectly adequate for their own environment. Although much of this observation has been arrived at statistically, some non-standard forms of English may present difficulties for children learning to read. If the dialect, for example West Indian Creole, is far removed from the written form then reading may be that much more difficult, but this can be overcome by a suitable teaching method: for example using the 'Breakthrough to Literacy' scheme rather than 'Janet and John' books. There is no kind of usage which has ever been shown to be totally absent from working-class speech.

Teachers need to change their attitudes to non-standard English and think less in terms of right and wrong and more in terms of appropriate and inappropriate for certain specific contexts. It will still be the duty of teachers to develop competence in standard English, but this should be seen as the task of learning a set of conventions, not something which is aesthetically or morally superior.

The Language of the Classroom

The work of Douglas Barnes and his colleagues (1969) has shown that most teachers have a good deal to learn about their own use of language in classrooms and also how to develop children's linguistic abilities. Barnes (1969, p. 55) has shown, for example, that teachers, especially in secondary schools, make inappropriate use of unfamiliar technical or abstract language

Teachers are also too much addicted to a form of question and answer style which Barnes describes as 'hunting the label' — an essentially closed form of learning. Barnes (1976) shows that much more use could be made of children's exploratory language in small group discussions without the teacher present. His book, From Communication to Curriculum (1976) is a very stimulating volume which all teachers should read. Meanwhile, perhaps one might offer his/her own interpretation of some of the lessons which emerge for teachers: For instance

1 Many teachers use language which is unnecessarily remote and difficult.

2 Some teachers rebuff children who try to get to grips with complicated ideas by expressing themselves in their own natural language.

3 Children (and adults) learn by talking: talk of the right kind helps to clarify thinking.

4 Most teachers talk too much.

The Need for Linguistic Skills

Experts have advised that schools should develop a language policy for the whole curriculum - language across the curriculum. Another view suggests that one aspect of linguistic development is the acquisition of different kinds of language which would be appropriate for different kinds of knowledge. The language of science, for example, is different from the language of history: the conventions of writing up an experiment are different from writing a history essay. The concepts and terminology in both disciplines are also different. Certain kinds of linguistic competence may be common across the curriculum, but pupils also need to learn about some specialist uses of language — both receptive and active. Another way of expressing this idea is to say that most teachers would now agree that all pupils should be literate, but literacy for secondary pupils ought to mean much more than possessing the basic skills of reading and writing. Teachers need to be more specific about what they expect pupils to be able to read and write about. So we might talk of scientific literacy, or social, economic and political literacy. If we did, we would come to the conclusion that most children are not adequately prepared by schools for the linguistic skills they would need as responsible adults.

Summary

1. The idea of language deficit has gradually given way to the idea of language difference.
2. The concept of 'compensatory education' is of very doubtful validity and distracts attention from real educational and social problems in the schools.
3. Language is closely related to ‘context of situation’ and therefore to questions of schools organization and grouping.
4. Language in education should be seen as an integral part of curriculum reform.
5. Teachers’ attitudes to behaviour are crucial factors in pupils’ linguistic behaviour and learning: teacher effectiveness can be seen largely in terms of verbal interaction.
6. Teacher education must be more concerned with language as a means of learning and also with the dynamics or classroom interaction and communication.

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