

CULTURAL FACTORS HINDERING MASTERY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A CASE OF KILIFI COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT: *This study examined the various cultural factors hindering the mastery of English language in Kilifi County. A sample of 236 respondents representing Students, pupils, head teachers, teachers, parents, religious leaders, Pwani University Language specialists, Ministry of Education officers was drawn from Tezo Location. The proposed study was a descriptive survey, and both qualitative and quantitative data was collected by means of self administered questionnaires, Focus Group Discussions, and scheduled interviews. Qualitative data was analysed by thematic analysis while quantitative data was analysed by simple descriptive statistics and ranking by participatory methods. The study identified the cultural practices that hinder good mastery of English as frequent usage of Kiswahili and Mother Tongue when speaking at home, the declaration that English is a foreign language and the belief by the local community that speaking in English at home is a sign of pride and disrespect. Based on the findings, recommendations were made on how to promote good English mastery in Kenyan Schools.*

KEYWORDS: Mastery of English, Mother tongue, Kiswahili language, Academic performance, language of interaction, Language of Instruction

INTRODUCTION

Education systems world over recognise the important role that language plays in the acts of teaching and learning. These acts are dialogic and communicative in nature (Lopez, 2000). Communication is on the one hand, the key condition for teaching and learning to take place, and on the other, the medium through which learners and teachers make sense of their everyday endeavours in the classroom. Klein (1998) argues that language serves three important functions: communication, thought and recollection of information.

The perceived significance of the role of language in education is argued on the ground that in educating an individual, the medium of instruction is the means by which such a learner comes to access, and to understand information that ultimately leads to his/her acquisition of knowledge, life skills and production skills. According to Crystal (1994) and Lopez (2000), there is a close relationship between language and communication and also between language and thought.

These arguments suggest that language of instruction and examination has an important role to play in the learning process. In Kenya, except for the lower classes (Std1-3), the language of instruction in schools is English. It is also the language of examination even where instruction is in mother tongue. This implies that good mastery of English language is crucial in learning and achievement in Science.

Statement of the problem

Kenya is a multilingual country that uses English as a medium of instruction (at some levels) and testing (at all levels) of education. English is a second language and a third language for majority of Kenyan students. This is likely to pose a challenge for understanding textual material in other subjects taught in English namely the Sciences and arts. For most of the learners; understanding of textual material has been shown by research (Mbacho & Githua, 2013) to be problematic even for first language speakers meaning that difficulties in comprehension could be greater for second and third language speakers.

The 2010 report in Kenya by the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) on performance at National examinations decries the poor performance in English language. Accordingly, in the sampled compositions, candidates could hardly write an English word correctly. Arguably, and from research, poor mastery of English language does inhibit a learner's active participation in other subjects and hence poor performance for pupils and students who are not well conversant with the English language.

Given the importance of English as a subject of learning and examination, this could spell doom to many since examinations are used as tools for selection for further education and training. Failure of learners in English would therefore be disastrous to learners who want to succeed in their careers and bring economic development for themselves, their societies and country as a whole and therefore hindering acquisition of Kenya's vision by 2020.

Justification

A lot of research targeting school performance and learner performance in English language examinations has been done in Kenya by Keraro, Okere and Mondoh (2002) and Mbacho and Githua (2013). The Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) also does analyses of all examinations done at national level and releases a report to schools every year. One would expect that with such effort, the problem of poor performance in English Language would have been addressed and rested. However, this is not the case. As regards the 2009 KCPE exam, the percentage mean for the English composition paper dropped by 8.08 points; from 40.48 in 2008 to 32.40 in the 2009 KCPE examination; the lowest mean in the four years reviewed. The reason for the drop is not clear. It appears the challenges that have been discussed at various education forums are still persistent.

Allegedly, students' lack of proficiency in, and mastery of English Language is a serious handicap in National examinations, with misspellings of scientific names, terms and simple everyday words being a common feature. It could be argued that a learner who does not comprehend resorts to rote learning. It is argued further by research that learning by rote leaves students unable to tackle questions that require practical application of what they have been taught in class.

This study will endeavor to identify the persistent challenges that lead to lack of mastery in English language as is reflected in the performance in national examinations. The study design will also allow for exploration with teachers, learners and other stakeholders in education on how to meet the challenges; with a consequence of advising policy.

Kilifi County and Tezo location in particular is chosen due to its proximity to Pwani University, in terms of impact; and is also representative of the Coast Region and the country with regard to the problem at hand.

Objectives of the study

The main purpose of the study was to contribute important knowledge on how culture can negatively interfere with the mastery of the English Language which is the Language of instruction in Kenya. Except Kiswahili Language, all other subjects in Kenya are taught in English. This study specifically sought:

[1] To work with Education Stakeholders in order to identify and prioritize cultural challenges to mastery of English language in Kilifi County;

[2] To expose policy makers to the prioritized challenges, initiatives and interventions to improve English Language mastery in Kilifi County.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey was used for investigation of the problem. According to Orodho (1999) descriptive surveys are used to describe some aspects or characteristics of human population such as opinions and knowledge of certain phenomenon. This study fitted here because it sought to find out the opinions of various stakeholders (students, teachers, head teachers, MoE (Ministry of Education) zonal officers and language specialists at Pwani University. In obtaining the student sample, they were first stratified into classes and then selected by systematic random sampling using their admission numbers in the class register. This was to assure representation without bias. Teachers were selected purposefully based on the fact that: they were to be teaching English subject. The MoE (Ministry of Education) officers were selected purposefully on the basis of their relevance to the problem at hand. Similarly the PU (Pwani University) language specialists were selected purposefully based on the fact that they should be teaching English language.

Parents were selected purposefully from amongst the members of PTA in the schools and in the same way religious leaders were selected purposely from amongst the Pastoral Programme Instruction providers. The sample therefore comprised 236 respondents including 40 secondary school students, 120 primary school pupils, 24 primary school teachers, Ten (10) secondary school teachers, Eight (8) head teachers, Two (2) MoE Zonal Specialists, and three (3) Pwani University language Specialists, Twelve (12) religious leaders and 16 parents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data was analysed as per the answers obtained from the respondents during the collection of data. The information obtained is presented as indicated below:

Poorly Performed Subjects

Table 1: Teachers' responses on poorly performed subjects in schools

Subject	Frequency	Percent
English	27	61.4
Mathematics	8	18.2
Science	3	6.8
Science and mathematics	3	6.8
All	3	6.8
Total	44	100.0

As shown in the table 1, majority (61.4%) of the teachers reported that the most poorly performed subject in school was English. The other poorly performed subject as indicated by 8 (18.2%) teachers was Mathematics. The findings above study justify this study and therefore the need to find out how culture negatively interferes with the performance of English language.

Language of Interaction among students

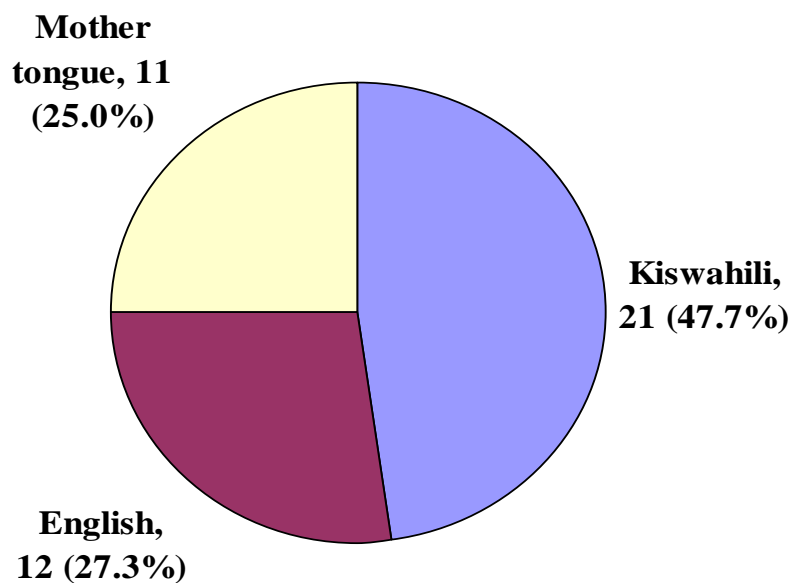


Figure 1: Language of interaction among students

According to Figure 1, 21 (47.7%) teachers said that students used Kiswahili to interact with their colleagues, 12 (27.3%) reported that they used English while 11 (25.0%) indicated that they used mother tongue. This shows that English language has not been prioritized as a language of communication in schools in Kilifi County.

School performance in English

Table 2 : Teachers' rating on school performance in English

Performance rate	Frequency	Percent
Very poor	1	2.3
Poor	22	50.0
Good	20	45.5
Very good	1	2.3
Total	44	100.0

As shown in Table 2, half (50.0%) of the teachers who participated in the study were of the views that school performance in English was poor whereas 1 (2.3%) teacher reported that it was very poor. On the other hand, 20 (45.5%) teachers reported that the performance rate was good while the remaining 1 (2.3%) indicated that it was very good. Therefore, teachers were aware of the poor performance in English subject which in turn led to poor performance in other subjects.

Cultural challenges faced by learners in the mastery of English language

To determine cultural challenges faced by learners in the mastery of English language, teachers answered questionnaires presented to them. Table 3 shows results obtained.

Table 3: Cultural practices that negatively affect the mastery of English language

Practices	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Frequent use of Kiswahili and mother tongue at home	82	51.3	1
People declaring that English is a foreign language	34	21.3	2
Community belief that use of English at home is a sign of pride and disrespect	20	12.5	3
Attending weddings, funerals and circumcision	16	10.0	4
Living and learning in the same division at all levels of schooling(from nursery to college)	10	6.3	5

Table 3 shows that 51.2% of the learners reported that the major cultural practice that influences mastery of English language was frequent use of Kiswahili and mother tongue for communicating at home. Other cultural factors mentioned were; people declaring that English is a foreign language (21.3%) and community belief that communicating in English at home is a sign of pride and disrespect (12.5%). These findings show that parents do not use English at home when communicating with their children and this would make children to underrate the importance of English as an official language in school. Findings during interviews and focus group discussions showed that cultural practices like weddings, funerals and circumcisions affect students mastery of English since the language of communication in these ceremonies is purely mother tongue. During interviews a case was provided where a female teacher in a primary school was attacked by some parents because of her insistence that pupils should communicate in English while at school. Such like cases made some hardworking teachers discouraged towards improving the performance of English in Tezo division, Kilifi County. This illustrates the

negative attitude parents and the general community have towards English which is a language of instruction of most subjects in schools. The students were further asked to reasons for a Poor Performance in English and their responses are shown in table 4.

Table 4: Learners' responses on areas of learning in English which need improvement

Areas	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Speaking in English regularly	70	43.8	1
Increase the number of English lessons per week	42	26.3	2
Teachers giving more English assignments	29	18.1	3
Through explanation of vocabulary	15	9.4	4
Increase number of textbooks	8	5.0	5
Role playing	5	3.1	6

Table 4 shows students suggestions on areas which needed improvement in order to enhance performance in English subject. Seventy (43.8%) of the learners were of the view that all learners should practice speaking in English, increase the number of English lessons per week (26.3%) and teachers should ensure students are given English assignments (18.1%). The study observed that there were no effective ways to enforce the speaking of English in schools. This is an area that needs to be addressed for learners to master the English language.

The study observed that learners did not speak English regularly, and that is why the learners cited speaking of English regularly as a way of improving the mastery of the English language. In many cases as the study observed learners also spoke other languages namely, Kiswahili and mother tongue. This culture of learners tended to suppress their mastery of the English language. Learners also suggested the Increase of English lessons per week and also giving more English assignments; and this was because they are aware of the low level of English in their schools which would be uplifted if these suggestions are acted upon.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study it can be concluded that English is very important regarding student career achievements as well as good performance in other subjects. However students were not able to display good mastery of English because of: mother tongue interference, lack of enough teaching and learning resources like books, laboratories and libraries. Poor performance in English consequently led to poor performance in other subjects. This tended to kill the dreams of students because their aspirations to excel in all other subjects would not be achieved.

On the strength of the findings the study recommends the following: Language policy: The language policy in Kenyan schools should be re- examined. English should be the official language of instruction right from class one. Kiswahili should only be used when teaching Kiswahili as subject. There should be no room for mother tongue even in lower primary.

Curriculum change: English language should be emphasized in the curriculum. There should be increase in the content taught in English. In the university, Communication Skills as a common course should be emphasized and effectively taught. The method of teaching it should be re-examined to include tutorials, presentations, and discussions. It should not be taught in large groups but be split into manageable numbers for effective teaching.

Guidance and Counseling: This department should be improved and emphasized in schools to enlighten learners about the importance of the English language. This would also help solve English- related problems facing students.

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