

## LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION IN KENYA: FOCUS ON LOWER PRIMARY IN SCHOOLS IN RURAL AREAS

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**ABSTRACT:** *The use of mother tongue as a language of instruction debate has been ongoing in Kenya as well as in other African countries with no consensus from researchers and policy makers. This paper focuses on the use of mother tongue in lower primary in schools in rural areas in Kenya and the reasons for deviations from guidelines that recommend the use of language of the catchment area in classes 1-3. This paper maintains that the use of mother tongue in the early years of schooling provides basic literacy skills necessary for learning in other subjects. Despite the benefits of use of mother tongue as the language of instruction in lower primary in schools in the rural areas, many primary schools in Kenya hardly use it for instruction. Not only does this paper recommend the use of mother tongue in lower primary in schools in rural areas in Kenya but also proposes that teachers perform the crucial role of enabling parents and other stakeholders in the education sector understand how mother tongue benefits the learner in the teaching learning process.*

**KEYWORDS:** language of instruction, mother tongue, literacy, quality of education, learner participation, cognitive development

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### INTRODUCTION

The debate on the use of mother tongue in education has been unresolved not only in Kenya but also in a number of African countries. The language of instruction in an education system determines the quality of education in the country and overall learner achievement. Prah (2003) describes the language or medium of instruction as the language in which basic skills and knowledge are imparted to learners. In Kenya, the official language of instruction policy states that children have a right to be taught in the language of the catchment area in classes (grades) 1-3 (Kenya Institute of Education, KIE, 1992), in schools in the rural areas, during which English is taught as a subject in the curriculum. Kiswahili is used as the language of instruction in lower primary in schools in urban areas. From grade 4 English is used as the medium of instruction. According to the Constitution of Kenya 2010 (Republic of Kenya, 2010), Kiswahili and English are the country's official languages, while the former is also the national language. The Constitution also recognizes and protects the local languages. Furthermore, the country is a host to over forty two local languages making the country multilingual, a number of the languages have dialects (Ogechi, 2002). The use of mother tongue for instruction has always been challenged as well as supported by parents, teachers, scholars and other stakeholders in the education sector. This paper attempts to get possible answers to the questions: how does the language of instruction

used in lower primary in schools in rural areas in Kenya benefit the learner and why are teachers not using mother tongue as a medium of instruction in lower primary in schools in rural areas in Kenya. It argues that the use of mother tongue as a language of instruction in lower primary in schools in the rural areas in Kenya is beneficial to the learner yet it is the least preferred medium of instruction in lower primary in schools in rural areas in Kenya.

### **Language of instruction and quality of education**

The World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien in 1990 identified quality as a prerequisite for achieving the fundamental goal of equity. In 2000, this was further reaffirmed when the EFA Dakar Framework for Action was adopted in the World Education Forum that took place in Dakar, Senegal. In Kenya, in an attempt to meet international and national obligations, the MoEST embarked on reform by developing Sessional Paper No.1 of 2005, which states that the long term objective of the Government is to provide every Kenyan with basic quality education. Moreover, the national language policies and the selection of languages to be used as the media of instruction in schools are of considerable importance for the quality of teaching and learning. In instances where the language of instruction is appropriately chosen, learning outcomes are higher with greater access to learning, retention and continuity in school. According to Fontem and Oyetade (2005), research and classroom practice have revealed that the central question of proper choice of language of instruction is the most fundamental factor in establishing the quality of educational provision. Moreover, according to Chiatoh and Akumbu (2014), standards of English language proficiency as well as overall academic performance depend fundamentally on the choice of language of instruction since this greatly determines not only the type and quality of curriculum contents but also the degree of effectiveness and efficiency of teaching methods and actual learning in the classroom. In addition, in support of this position, a study by Chiatoh and Akumbu (2014) affirmed that mother tongues should be acknowledged as vital linguistic input into the process of teaching of English as a Second Language.

### **Language of instruction and learner participation in class**

Adoption of a familiar language in class improves learning outcomes. In instances where learners are instructed in a language that is familiar, learning outcomes are higher with increased efficiency and learner participation in class. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1953) states that the best medium for teaching a child is the mother tongue through which children understand and express themselves freely. Furthermore, when the language of instruction is familiar, the teacher is able to use more active and effective teaching methods as well as instructional materials. Therefore, the use of mother tongue enables learners identify instruments which can be used to produce instructional materials in their immediate environment. Baker (2001) and Cummins (2000) note that the use of familiar language to teach beginning literacy facilitates an understanding of sound symbols or meaning symbols correspondence among young children. Furthermore, the learner's psychological stress is reduced through the use of a language related to the learner's home language. Moreover, Kioko et al., (2008) opine that learners instructed in a new language from the start of schooling experience delayed or ineffective fluency especially in reading and spelling in the new language.

The language of instruction adopted also has a bearing on school performance. In instances where pupils enter school and are taught in a language which is not familiar, they have more difficulties

to master reading skills and to perform well in school (Rivera, 1990; Wolfaardt, 2004). In support of this position, Cummins (2000) argues that a solid foundation in mother tongue results in learners being more confident at school and therefore, it strengthens the affective domain involving confidence, self-esteem and identity. As echoed by Gfeller and Robinson (1998), a familiar language gives confidence to pupils as a symbol of their history and culture. Due to improved learner participation in class because of use of a familiar language according to Prah (2003), pupils become more creative and innovative in their own mother tongues. Learner centred pedagogy provides opportunity for teachers and learners to utilize higher order skills.

### **Language of instruction and cognitive development**

The use of mother tongue enhances cognitive development of a child. In instances where mother tongue use in lower primary schools is adequately structured and implemented, cognitive development is improved. According to Noormohamadi (2008), mother tongue is essential for learning as part of intellectual ability. Moreover, Plessis (2008), posits that much of a child's future social and intellectual development hinges on the milestone of mother tongue. In support of this position, a study by Njogu (2015), though done among pre-school children, revealed that mother tongue contributes positively towards the learning of the English language and both languages, that is, mother tongue (L1) and English (L2) nurture each other. Studies have also shown that literacy is important for long lasting lexical development and fluency (Baker, 2006; Cohen, 1989). Therefore, the use of home language, which Kosonen (2009) compares to a safe bridge to be used to cross a river (education) enables the learners to move from home to school and get familiar with activities in the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, according to the imagery by Kosonen, learners taught using English as a Second Language, lack the bridge, therefore, they either swim or sink. However, the ones who swim successfully to the other side of the river are a minority.

### **Language of instruction used in lower primary in schools in rural areas**

The use of mother tongue in lower primary in schools in rural areas was reaffirmed in the most recent educational white paper (Republic of Kenya, 2012) and in the new Kenyan education sector plan Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) (2014). Many schools in the rural areas in Kenya, however, do not use mother tongue as a medium of instruction despite the national policy (Begi, 2014). In support of this position, a study by Githinji (2014) affirmed that the language of instruction across classes in primary schools in Nyeri County in the order of use, in most schools was English, followed by code switching, code mixing, while Kiswahili and Kikuyu were the least popular. Moreover, a study by Khejeri (2014) revealed that English, Kiswahili and mother tongue are used for instruction but mother tongue is the least preferred for instruction. A mismatch between language policies and practice exists in schools and this indicates that children are being instructed in a language they are not yet familiar with when they enter school. According to Webb (2004), children receiving instruction in an unfamiliar language in their learning process in schools are likely to be negatively affected. Moreover, children who struggle to understand lessons in an unfamiliar language are more likely to skip school, repeat grades, drop out and fail to learn than those taught in their mother tongue. An earlier study by Colclough, et al. (2000), on gender inequalities in primary schooling, indicated that the language of instruction used in schools is one school factor, which contributed to pupils dropping out of school. Though there has been a mismatch between language policies and practice, some studies indicate that teachers play a crucial role in the ultimate choice of the language of instruction used (Chiori and Harris, 2001). Moreover,

teachers' choices may be an outcome of an interplay of factors such as individual language preference and competence, attitude and values, learners' social and cultural environments, parents and the larger community (Muthwii, 2002).

The attitude of teachers and parents in Kenya may have an influence on the implementation of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in lower primary schools. According to Bamgbose (1991) and Robinson (1996), the social and political history of a nation define how attitudes towards a language develop. Therefore, the colonial and post colonial language and education policies provide a basis of the explanation of attitudes towards local languages and English (Roy-Campbell, 1996). If teachers' feelings are negative, they are unlikely to use mother tongue as a medium of instruction. Khejeri (2014) investigated teachers' attitudes towards the use of mother tongue as a language of instruction in lower primary schools in Hamisi, Vihiga County, Kenya. The findings of the study revealed that respondents saw more disadvantages than advantages in the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction. A study carried out in Ethiopia by Bachore (2014), however, revealed that learners, teachers and parents had positive attitudes and perception on the use of mother tongue. Another study by Manyonyi, Mbori and Okwako (2016) in lower primary schools in Bungoma South Sub County, indicated that teachers believed that mother tongue did not add any value to the academic performance of learners.

Moreover, some parents, school authorities and other stakeholders in education support the idea of direct introduction into the language of wider communication or the official language of the country as a preferred method to mother tongue instruction. According to Cummins (2003), this is referred to as the maximum exposure hypothesis which states that the more time spent on learning a language, the better a person will do it. They believe that the earlier the children start using the language of wider communication the more they will enjoy the opportunities that exist in the language (Bamgbose, 1991; Murray, 2007). However, instruction through a language that learners do not speak is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Submersion makes teaching and learning difficult especially when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher. Moreover, according to Benson (2004), submersion teaching plunges pupils into the world of unknown, linguistically, academically and experientially and they can take years before they discover meaning in what they are reading. An earlier study by Bunyi (1999) indicated that during instruction, the teacher did much of the talking and gave long explanations and from the observations, the teacher became more of an actor or performer instead of a facilitator.

## CONCLUSIONS

The language of instruction in lower primary schools is one of the most important inputs into the education production function, however, findings from studies done in Kenya imply that most Kenyan children in schools in rural areas are denied the opportunity to develop basic literacy skills using their mother tongues. However, teachers have a role in the ultimate choice of the language of instruction during the teaching learning process. The resolution on language of instruction should be in the best interest of the child because, if the problem of proper choice of language of instruction remains unresolved, concerns about falling standards of English and poor educational

quality in general will continue to persist in the educational system, particularly from children in schools in rural areas.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Educational reforms should pay attention to the crucial question of the language of instruction and implementation of language policy in education, particularly, the use of the language of the catchment area in lower primary in schools in the rural areas because it provides a foundation for all other subsequent learning. The teachers should help parents and other stakeholders in the education sector understand the benefits of use of mother tongue in the early years of learning.

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