

"IMPLEMENTING LANGUAGE POLICY IN KENYA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM: CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD"

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Abstract— Language is a key pillar that drives a nation to succeed on varied fronts. It is fundamental to communication, and its different real-life situations are examined and interpreted. The use of local languages, especially in pedagogy, is instrumental to the holistic development of individuals in multilingual settings where different cultures commune because of diverse linguistic habitats. Local languages are the principal tools used in the creation, dissemination, and interpretation of knowledge, as well as cultural beliefs and practices that govern the way of life of a particular community. Local languages are pre-eminent contributors to any country's social, political, and economic development. Without them, individuals are confronted with sub-standard ways of living coupled with stagnation in different spheres of life. Because of the impact of local languages, their use is entrenched in the Kenyan constitution of 2010 as stipulated in chapter 2, section 7(3), which notes the commitment of the state to promote and protect the diversity of languages of the people of Kenya and to promote the development and use of indigenous languages, Kenya Sign language, Braille and other communication formats and technologies accessible to persons with disabilities. It is deemed a basic human right in the Constitution; therefore, when individuals are denied the opportunity to use it, their human rights are violated. Despite the benefits that accrue from the use of local languages, they have not been given the attention they deserve in the Kenyan context and the African continent generally. This continent has relegated them to the periphery, especially in the realm of education, a fact that has contributed significantly to the alienation of the continent. Most education systems in Africa precede international languages, even though the number of those fluent in these languages is minimal. Using such languages in the education system poses far-reaching consequences because there is a disconnect between what is formally taught and its applicability in the social domain. On this premise, this study sought to investigate the extent to which teachers implement the local language policy in education, examine the challenges faced in implementing the local language policy, and describe practical solutions to the challenges faced in the implementation. Using a qualitative approach, the findings were that over 50% of teachers, parents and stakeholders agreed that the enhancement of local languages in schools promoted career development and opened avenues which can be used to achieve social integration.

Index Terms—Language, Multilingualism, Pedagogy, Constitution

INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential tool in society, which is best captured in Malinowski's assertion that 'language is the necessary means of communion: it is one indispensable instrument for creating

the ties of the moment without which unified social action is impossible' (Diamond, 1959). Language serves a myriad of functions, the basic of which is communication. It is a social product springing up with the first community, developing with the increasing needs of culture and sophistication and vanishing when society vanishes. Thus, language happens to be the index of the progress of society and the longer a society exists, the richer the language becomes' (Manindranath, 2000). Using the mother tongue as a channel through which knowledge is imparted cannot be trivialised. Fagerberg-Diallo (2006) demonstrates that learning to read and write in the language (s) used at the community level triggers learners. They enable individuals to participate and take leading roles in local institutions and organisations. Such persons encounter an essential growth in credence, for they establish businesses, manage local associations and community-based groups, and participate in local political institutions. As parents, they give better parental support to the school-going children.

There is a strong correlation between language and ethnicity. Language defines a community; through it, community members conduct their businesses and interact with one another and the outside world. Fought (2006) notes that language and ethnicity are deeply interlaced. Language contributes to the social and psychological processes involved in forming ethnic identity. Ethnicity is seen as a social construction that indicates association with a particular group that is usually a minority within a country. Members of ethnic groups share common cultural attributes, such as their language. Hence, the bond between language and ethnicity puts the language that defines the community, in this case, the native one, at the core of the discussion.

Background information on the Language Policy

According to the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (2005), the first mien of language policies in Africa dates to the subdivision of Africa among the European powers in the 19th century. Besides the adverse political and economic effects, these policies have significantly influenced education. Although history has made the European languages an irrefutable attribute of our linguistic terrain, it would be a blunder to believe that we can achieve practical development if we remain reliant on them. Instead, we should encourage the co-existence of African and European languages in our educational system, prioritising the former. To achieve this, rigorous revision must be done to the existing policies followed by their implementation.

A historical account of the language policy in Kenya is crucial for comprehending pertinent language-oriented issues. Nabea (2009) observes that the language policy in Kenya is based on the colonial language policy following European powers' invasion and annexation of the African continent, which took place towards the end of the 19th century. After independence, English was declared the official language, a decision which Ngugi (1986) notes helped prolong neo-colonialism rather than help bring change. Several commissions (Ominde Commission 1964; Gachathi 1976; Mackay 1980, among others) were initiated to inform the language policy, but

only a few recommendations made by such commissions were put into practice. Thus, English was considered the language of official communication and was seen as illustrious compared to the native languages. English was a status symbol for anyone who learnt it began abominating the peasant majority, thereby becoming alienated from the values of his/her native language. Promoting English at the expense of local languages is detrimental to Kenyan children's future.

Objectives of the study

This paper sought to address the following objectives.

1. To investigate the extent to which teachers implement the local language policy in education.
2. To examine the challenges faced in the implementation of the local language policy.
3. To describe practical solutions to the challenges faced in the implementation.

Benefits of using mother tongue as the medium of instruction

Any language can be used to achieve sophistication in any sphere of life. All languages can successfully steer any country's cornerstones, including political, educational, social, and economic factors. Tembe and Norton (2008) note that many researchers have provided compelling support for promoting mother tongue education in the early years of schooling over the past two decades. They note that these researchers make the case that knowledge and skills achieved in the mother tongue can transfer across languages and that multilingual children perform well when the school teaches the mother tongue effectively. Generally speaking, using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in schools and lower grades has several explicit strengths.

According to Fafunwa (1990), using a native language as a medium of instruction is beneficial since learners will better understand the concepts taught than those who study in a foreign language. Wilhite (2003) also supports this assertion by arguing that using a language that learners use for everyday interactions improves learning and aids in establishing a link with the local cultural contexts. It also helps boost a child's self-esteem since he/she is made aware that his/her local language is valued and acknowledged. Tomasevski (2003) points out that using a native language as a channel through which education is acquired satisfies the rights criteria of obtainability, attainability, sustainability, and malleability. In sum, the mother tongue enhances cultural identity. Through it, children learn who they are and about their communities' history, customs, and beliefs. It also enables them to appreciate themselves as members of the society. It is only then that they can appreciate languages used in other communities.

Mberia (2016) notes that using native languages as the media of instruction in early formal education has several advantages for the child, community and the country. These benefits far outweigh the vexations of addressing the problems of administering a policy using such languages as the media of instruction. Fishman (1968) argues that nothing in any language's

composition impedes it from becoming a channel of modern enlightenment. According to Amara Language Organisers (as cited in Mberia, 2016), the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction is essential for many reasons, namely: it allows for smooth change from home to school environment; the child is allowed to concentrate on one exercise which is the subject being taught rather than having to divide his/her attention and mental energies between the subject and the demands of a new language; the use and the early mastery of mother tongue have the effect of constructively advancing the role of the brain that is concerned with language and scientific experiments have shown that children learn better and faster when they communicate in their native languages.

Gacheche (2010) notes that using a familiar language to teach children literacy is more effectual than an immersion system, as children can associate sounds with the symbols they see, thus facilitating comprehension. Moreover, learning new notions can be completed on time until the learners grasp the second language; thus, teachers and learners can broker meanings together, achieving adroitness in the second language through mutual relation rather than memorisation and mechanical learning. Laitin and Ramachandran (2014:2) argue that 'the choice of language influences human capital as it provides those who speak the state's official language with greater economic and political opportunities. The greater the proportion of the population that speaks that language of instruction in schooling, the lower the cost and the higher the level of human capital in society.' Development is made possible through a language that people understand best. In the case of Africans, it is their native language. These languages should be used in both written and oral communication. If they are confined to the latter, no tangible development can be realised, and poverty will continue defining African states. These studies point out the advantages of using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. The present study supports the arguments fronted by these scholars, and it is also interested in looking at the challenges that the principal implementers face while using the language policy and some practical solutions that can be used to address them.

Drawbacks of using mother tongue as the medium of instruction

Verifiable studies by some scholars show that using the mother tongue as the language of instruction has drawbacks. For example, Smits, Huisman and Kruijff (2008) posit that the use of local languages is twofold: it could unite ethnic groups or isolate the members from the dominant language-speaking part of the population and limit them in their use of a society's lawful resources, including education. Benson (as cited in Smits, Huisman and Kruijff, 2008) notes that in terms of educational attainment, people who do not speak the language of instruction have less opportunity to understand enrolment procedures, communicate with school administrators or comprehend what is being taught. In schools, the quality of education for these pupils is lower because they do not understand what is being taught. This leads to inequalities of opportunities. According to Muthwii (2002), the mother tongue has been imposed for political and not sociolinguistic or demographic reasons. Parents want their children to master English since it is the language of wider communication (Bergman, 1996).

Several governments developed mother tongue-based education policies for learners in the lower grades to minimise language inequalities. It has long been realised that educational results may be affected negatively if there is a difference between the languages children speak and those used in the educational system. Despite the setbacks, using the mother tongue as the language of instruction in lower grades has more strengths than weaknesses. Therefore, nations interested in developing their citizenry should use this policy to reap the benefits of civilisation.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted Cummins Proficiency theory (1979, 1991, & 2000). In this theory, Cummins makes a distinction between two differing kinds of language proficiency, namely Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), which are the 'surface' skills of speaking and listening and which are typically acquired quickly by many students, particularly by those from language backgrounds like English who spend a lot of their school time interacting with native speakers. The other is Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which is the basis for a child's ability to cope with the academic demands placed upon him/her in various subjects.

Cummins (1991) believes that while learning one language, a child acquires skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge that can be drawn upon when working in another language. The standard underlying proficiency thus provides the base for the development of both the first and the second language. It follows that any expansion of standard underlying proficiency that takes place in one language will have a beneficial effect on other languages. Cummins further notes that it is essential that students be encouraged to continue their native language development, and one way this can be done is by parents assisting their children at home by providing them with opportunities to read extensively in their mother tongues. He also posits that parents should make time every evening to discuss with their children in their native languages what they did at school. They should give their children time to explain in their native languages how they solved mathematical problems or conducted experiments in school, for example. Cummins (2000) further postulates that 'conceptual knowledge developed in one language helps to make input in other languages comprehensible.' If a child already understands some concepts in his/ her language, all the child must do is acquire the label of such notions in English. This theory is significant for the study since it considers the vital role of the mother tongue in a child's academic life. Different skills are acquired through it, and the child's ability to cope with various academic demands is taken care of.

Methodology

Data was collected using an interview schedule and Focus Group Discussions. A total of thirty respondents participated in the research. Fifteen participated in the group discussions, while the others were interviewed. A total of ten schools were sampled from two neighbouring constituencies of Uriri and Awendo in Migori County. The schools sampled from the former constituency were rural, while those sampled from the latter were urban. All the teachers who

participated in the study were native speakers of Dholuo and were drawn from Dholuo-speaking school catchments. The pupils in the rural schools were native speakers of Dholuo; thus, this language was used as the medium of instruction, while those in the urban schools were drawn from different communities such as *Luhya, Kisii, Kuria, Luo* and *Somali*. Because of this linguistic heterogeneity, Kiswahili, a lingua franca, was used as the medium of instruction from grade one.

The interviews and the Focus Group Discussions were conducted in English. These interviews were conducted with the teachers in their respective schools. The Focus Group Discussions were held at a central school for both groups of participants. The main aim of the research was to find out if the teachers implemented the language policy in their schools, the strengths of the policy, and the challenges that they faced while implementing the policy. All participants in the study were lower-grade teachers, the principal implementers of the policy. For this study, the points of reference were the reports of the commissions vested with the responsibility of reviewing the language policy in education in post-independent Kenya. They were The Ominde Report (1964), the Gachathi Report (1976), the Koech Report (1999), and the Sessional Paper No. 14 of 2012.

Discussion

All the participants noted that the language policy required that children be taught in their mother tongue, which was vital since it made the change from the home to the school environment smooth. Using a language familiar to the learners made them feel at ease and appreciated. They learnt about their customs, beliefs, traditions, and community history through their mother tongue. The teachers observed that although the policymakers had good intentions for the learners, uniformity was needed in implementing the policy. The methods used varied depending on the comprehension of different teachers, the situations in which they found themselves, and the kind of learners they had.

The teachers cited several challenges that impeded the effective implementation of the policy. They all decried the absence of various teaching and learning materials in the mother tongue. The available materials were insufficient, the curriculum developers failed to give a straightforward guide on how the instruction in the native languages was to be conducted and, so the teachers were left with no option but to consult the curriculum that was written in English and which was meant for the upper primary and customise it to fit the mother tongue situation. In other words, the interpretation of the policy was at the discretion of individual teachers because of an ambivalent comprehension of it.

Most of the participants who taught in rural as well as urban schools noted that they were not trained on mother tongue as a subject; thus, when they faced challenges, they would code switch in the process of instruction, thereby leaving the learners confused as to which language they were supposed to use in answering questions. Those teaching in the rural schools noted some

concepts, especially those in the realm of science, that were difficult to explain in their mother tongue because they did not know the words to use for them. One teacher had this to say:

Some words are foreign and outside the learners' immediate environment. They are innovations that have come about because of technological advancement. When we come across these words, we find it difficult to conceptualise what they could be. Because we do not have dictionaries, for example, a Dholuo-English dictionary, we cannot tell what they are in our mother tongue or even give the learners equivalents of such terms or concepts. We scratch our heads to find examples in the classroom so learners can have a rough idea of such a word, but we fail. It becomes more frustrating for the teacher when he/she finds himself/herself in such a situation. Therefore, we resort to using an English word to explain to them such concepts. Such experiences are, at times, embarrassing for the teacher.

The status of native languages should be raised to enable them to compete favourably with foreign languages. This argument is supported by Mbithi (2014), who notes that indigenous languages should be given official status, assistance, and motivation at all levels of the education system. Structures should be implemented to teach and scrutinise the capabilities of the indigenous languages used in Kenya. Such structures should include the resources to produce and disseminate instructional materials. Gacheche (2010) also supports this assertion by noting that the government can increase the functional uses of the native languages beyond the home so that as literacy in them increases, they attain substantial efficacy in the community. By so doing, the local languages become a valuable resource which thrives alongside global languages. Moreover, ameliorating the status of local languages will also refine the socioeconomic prospects and political involvement of a more significant portion of the population.

The teachers in the urban schools argued that even though Dholuo was the language of the catchment area, the learners came from different communities. So, the policy dictated that Kiswahili be used as the medium of instruction. Those teaching in the urban schools noted that not all of them used Kiswahili to deliver their content since some were not competent in the language. One of them had this to say:

Kiswahili is a complex language. I can write it well, but I have a problem speaking it. The language is demanding in terms of 'ngeli'; sometimes, some learners correct you when you speak it. Most of us Luos have a negative attitude towards Kiswahili, and we prefer English because we speak it easily. Personally, my handicap in the Kiswahili language makes me resort to instructing the learners in English and at times, I code-switch. I know this doesn't seem right, but I do not have a choice. Since the learners come from the urban centre, they are conversant with the English language and understand what is being taught. The government should offer us opportunities to attend refresher courses to teach learners in their mother tongue so that we can gain fresh insights. They should also provide us with adequate resources to be well-equipped as policy implementers.

Even though all the teachers were native speakers of Dholuo, some were not competent in the language, which acted as a barrier to its practical use in the classroom during instruction. Such teachers were burdened because they had to learn the language in the instruction process, which made the process simple and manageable. Because of the challenges that they faced, some of them resorted to code-switching. One of the teachers in the rural schools had this to say:

I was born and bred in Kawangware. My mother speaks Luganda, and my father Dholuo, so we used English in our house since my mother could hardly communicate in Kiswahili. We rarely interacted in Dholuo, a situation compounded by the fact that the children in our neighbourhood came from different ethnic backgrounds, so we used Kiswahili. I trained at Machakos Teachers' College and only returned home when looking for a job. My father encouraged me to return to the village since getting an employment opportunity in the village was more accessible than in Nairobi. The only times I could speak Dholuo frequently were in the village and here (in school). The first few months were very challenging because I dealt with learners who did not speak Kiswahili. I sometimes mix Kiswahili and Dholuo as I teach my learners in grade two.

The teachers had misgivings about using the mother tongue to instruct the learners since they noted it was not the language used in the examination. They argued that this did a lot of harm to the learners. It was a waste of time, energy, and resources. They noted that examinations are set and done in English at the end of primary education. Therefore, learners must understand the essence of learning in their mother tongue during their formative years. They need an opportunity to express themselves in the languages crucial to their academic foundations, which play vital roles in comprehending essential concepts. The teachers asked: is it worth learning in a language that ceases to be valid once one completes lower primary, a language confined to the periphery and devalued once one climbs the academic ladder? This issue was a point of concern for most of them. Failure to use the mother tongue as a language of instruction even though the policy demands so is best captured by Adegoju (2008), who notes that the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction is not enforced at the level of implementation and to support this claim, he quotes Adegbite's (2003:188) assertion that the elite of the society is to blame for this situation:

Since the elite dominates policy-making in Nigeria, the interests of the elite have always been equated with public interest. Consequently, the dominance of English over the indigenous languages in Nigeria and the attendant positive attitude towards the language can be attributed to elitist interest.

The situation in Nigeria, as presented by Adegbite, is replicated in Kenya. The policy on language is formulated in the boardroom and the interests of those to whom it is established need to be fully taken care of. In most cases, the situation on the ground is not considered during the inception or the implementation of such policies. Those concerned with implementing such policies (for example, Quality Assurance Officers) do not make follow-ups to ensure that the direct consumers benefit. They need to establish the weaknesses of such policies so that

improvements can be made to ensure that the children benefit from such interventions. Coupled with negative attitudes and laxity that have been developed by the principal implementers towards this language policy, practical solutions need to be put in place if the interests of the African children, particularly the Kenyan ones, are to be taken care of.

The participants in the study noted that some parents, especially those in rural areas, needed help with the implementation of the policy. The parents argued that teaching children in their mother tongue was detrimental because such children could not compete favourably with their counterparts in the urban areas taught in English. To such parents, learning can only take place in English; therefore, the sole responsibility of the teachers was to teach the children different concepts in English and give them opportunities to express themselves at a tender age. One teacher explained her encounter with a parent representative after a stormy meeting at the school compound. This is what she reported:

The parents had resolved that their children be instructed in English rather than their mother tongue because the exams done at the end of primary education were set and administered in English. The parents thought that the decision to instruct the learners in their native language was the teachers' and not the Ministry's. The parent representative told me that parents did not kindly take that decision because, according to them, the teachers had already developed a negative attitude towards their children and concluded that they were best suited for the village polytechnics after primary school. The reason why they were taught in their mother tongue. He further argued that the teachers had seen the potential in their children. They would have taught English, the language of wider communication, to give them a level ground to compete with their counterparts for positions in prestigious schools in different parts of the country.

Obanya (1995) observes that there is an erroneous assumption that African languages are inadequate as such they cannot address scientific and technical entities. This may be one of the reasons why the parents in the rural school mentioned above had misgivings about using the mother tongue as the language of instruction. Parents and other principal stakeholders need to be sensitised on the benefits of carrying out instructions in the child's home language in the lower grades so that certain misconceptions that are held are corrected.

Some teachers noted that since Kenya is a country where ethnicity is a sensitive issue, mother tongue should not be used as the medium of instruction in lower grades as it fuels ethnic divisions since, at a tender age, learners are made aware of their ethnic orientations and this makes them begin looking at themselves as different from those who come from other ethnic groups. Such groupings become more pronounced during the electioneering period when ethnicity becomes a major defining factor. Therefore, to achieve national cohesion, a national language should be used as a medium of instruction in all schools nationwide.

The participants concluded that the policy was good and should be fully executed. However, the government should put more effort into improving it by developing a realistic and practical

strategy to ensure that it is effectively implemented. Some suggestions for improving the policy are training the principal implementers on how to use the policy in service delivery to ensure uniformity in content dissemination for the benefit of the clients, who, in this case, are the learners. The Board of Management(s) should also sponsor early childhood teachers from their schools to neighbouring institutions which have successfully implemented the policies with good returns so that benchmarking can be done and best practices from such schools can be adopted. Quality assurance officers should regularly visit schools, offer guidance on problematic areas, or even seek specialists' services through their various county offices to assist the teachers.

Recommendations

First, communal effort is required among stakeholders, such as policymakers, scholars, implementers, education specialists and other advisors, to tackle the challenges of implementing the mother tongue policy so that practical solutions can be sought. Second, adequate resources such as textbooks and reference materials such as dictionaries and encyclopedias for all native languages must be developed so that the learners and the teachers can have materials to reference. Third, those concerned with languages whose orthographies have yet to be developed should do so as a matter of urgency. Fourth, challenges should be documented and addressed by the concerned parties. Fifth, increased funding to support the implementation of the policy. Such funds can be used in training, servicing programmes, and research to help improve this policy. Sixth, concerned personnel should thoroughly supervise to ensure children receive instruction in their native languages. Seventh, teaching the mother tongue as a subject alongside others in the teacher training institutions should be introduced so that the teachers are well equipped to handle instruction in the native languages once in the field. Eighth, parents should be maximally involved in the education of their children. They should be encouraged to engage their children more in their native languages, and they should assist them in tackling assignments given in the said languages. In this way, they would help advance the development of such languages and the concepts taught. Finally, resource persons in different native languages should be sought, especially in disseminating oral traditions to teach the learners about their history and culture.

Conclusion

Instruction in the mother tongue, especially in the lower grades, is vital to achieving education goals. Evidence has been provided on the benefits of using native languages to disseminate knowledge to learners. Countries such as China, Japan, and Russia do not instruct learners in English, yet they have significantly progressed regarding technology.

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