MOTHER TONGUE IN INSTRUCTION: THE ROLE OF ATTITUDE IN THE IMPLEMENTATION.

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ABSTRACT

The subject on what medium of instruction provides the child the best learning facility has caused lots of debate leading to a number of projects in various parts of the world. In Kenya, although the education policy on the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction in lower primary classes has been in existence for decades, this has not been institutionalized in schools across the country. With the government’s renewed directive to the use of mother tongue for instruction, it still remains unclear whether this will be implemented as various stakeholders express mixed feelings regarding its relevance. The study findings indicate that some of the challenges facing the use of MT in Kenyan schools include the multiplicity of languages and dialects, inconsistent strategies employed to handle the situation, sceptical attitudes of the society towards mother-tongue use in education, scarcity of financial resources, pedagogic problems, and even the clash between ethnic loyalties on one hand and the Teacher’s Service Commission policy which mandates a teacher to be posted anywhere within the country. It makes use of data collected from teachers, parents, language specialists as well as policy makers. Data collection involved interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis.

Key words: Vernacular, Language of instruction, Indigenous languages, Multilingualism, Mother tongue

1. INTRODUCTION

Mother Tongue Based Instruction is instruction in a child’s first language (L1), usually with a planned gradual transition to a second language (L2) or foreign language at a specified time in primary school. This usually takes place exclusively in the language most familiar to the learner. Children have the opportunity to learn core concepts primarily in a familiar language, and later, they learn the vocabulary for those concepts in a new language. In Kenya, this system is supposed to be applied in early childhood programs, preschool, and the lower primary school classes (up to class three). This has, however, not been achieved as schools have been using English right from preschool sighting a number of reasons for not adhering to the existing language policy. This has prompted the policy makers to reemphasize the language policy. The question that lingers is whether teachers are going to heed to this directive and change their practices. In order to understand the many opinions and attitudes expressed in this research, supplementary information on language in education, policies and practices, is explained. This information is necessary to help clarify the subsequent synthesis of the attitudes and opinions regarding the language of instruction, and the motivations behind these attitudes and arguments.

2. BACKGROUND

Like most African nations, Kenya is rich with indigenous languages. These are regarded as an important element in their cultural identity by Kenyans (Bunyi, 1999) although, for some, the existence of many languages is viewed as a root source of the tribal conflicts experienced in the country. These varied views and attitudes have far reaching implications for language classroom practices and education in general.

The African languages spoken in Kenya fall into four language categories: Bantu, Para-Nilotic, Nilotic and Cushitic (Sure & Webb, 2000). There are also other non-African languages such as English, Gujarati and Arabic. The Bantu group which includes the Kikuyu, Kamba, Luyha, Kisii,
Emb and Swahili is the largest. The Para-Nilotic groups are: Teso, Masai and Kalenjin. Luo is the only Nilotic language in Kenya, while the Cushitic group is made up of languages such as the Boran, Somali and Rendille.

The use of different languages divides Kenyans into ethnic groups associated with different regions of the country. However, with continued movement and resettlement, it is not easy to come up with accurate statistics for speakers of each language. For instance, in the rural areas, people generally speak their ethnic language. Along the ethnic border areas people use Kiswahili as a lingua franca with their neighbours. Others also learn their neighbour’s language, thus becoming trilingual and those who have been to school may also use some English among themselves. In urban areas where different ethnic groups and the international population come together, people strive to achieve multilingualism. It is mainly in these urban areas where English is used. Therefore Kenyans are usually either bilingual or, multilingual (Sure & Webb, 2000).

English has the highest status in Kenya as it is associated with the elite and those working in formal employment. In formal settings, both English and Kiswahili are commonly used. Local indigenous languages are often used in informal settings. In urban settings, ‘Sheng’ a language code popular with the youth is also used. This is a mixture of vernacular, Kiswahili and English and is used as an identity marker among the youth. It is highly lexicalized and its lexicon is mainly only intelligible to a few in-group members to whom it is a powerful identity marker while it excludes those who do not know it. Originating in the early 1970s in the slum areas of Nairobi (Ogechi, 2005), Sheng is gaining popularity across social classes even to neighbouring countries. Analysts of Kenyan education have however claimed that Sheng is a bad influence to education stating that its influence is a leading cause of bad performance in Swahili and English among learners (Momanyi, 2009). The Ministry of Education attributed the poor results posted in the English Subject in the 2013 KCSE exams to the use of Sheng, among other reasons.

The use of English and its functions can be traced back to Kenya’s colonial period. The missionaries, in collaboration with the colonial government, were the chief providers of Western-style education (Bunyi 1999). English had a significant role as the language of the master and the language of administration. Kiswahili, however, had long established itself in most parts of the East African coast as a result of trade between the Bantu-speaking groups, raising the issue of what language was to be used as the medium of instruction, at what level it was to be introduced and who was qualified to teach it (Langat, 2005). The missionaries favoured the vernacular and supported by the philosophy that ‘Africa would be converted by Africa’ (Abdulaziz, 1982), they translated the Bible and other Christian literature into the local languages. English remained the language ofmissionaries, administrators and the European settler farmers (Muthwii, M. & Kioko, 2001).

Currently the English language plays a key role in Kenya’s legal, economic and education system (Michieka, 2005). In education, it is not only one of the important subjects in the curriculum but is itself the medium of instruction. It is however estimated that only 16% of Kenyans know English as a second language (Sure & Webb, 2000). Speakers of English mainly live in the urban areas of the country. English is still a marker of higher socio-economic class and there is a clear correlation between proficiency in English and the number of years one has spent in the education system, since school exposes people to more English (Bunyi, 1999).

Currently, in the Kenya constitution, the issue of language is clearly articulated as to ‘Promote and protect the diversity of languages of the people of Kenya (and to) promote the development and use of indigenous languages. Kenyan sign language, Braille and other communication formats and technologies accessible to persons with disabilities’ (Chapter 2, article 7, clauses 3a and 3b). The Kenya constitution at the same time retains Kiswahili and English as the national languages, an indication of its support for multilingualism. (The Kenya Constitution 2010 Chapter 2, Article 7)

In education, the current education policies mandate the use of vernacular in linguistically homogeneous areas for the first three years of school, though this has not been institutionalized. There is continued concern over the role of indigenous languages in education (Alidou, 2006; Bunyi, 1999; Kioko et al., 2008), with calls for a
African states have adopted varied models to the use of official/postcolonial languages as media of instruction. Some have adopted the subtractive models where learners are immersed into the use of official language right from their first year in school, others have taken the early exit (Uganda and Zambia) where learners learn in their indigenous language up to their third year at school then shift to the use of official language and very few have taken the late exit model (Tanzania). Alidou et al (2006) advocate for a shift to local languages at an early stage and recommend that it be extended to a later stage as much as possible for better results.

One of the points raised in favour of Mother Tongue use for instruction is that vernacular can promote linguistic skills that facilitate the acquisition of official languages (L2) at a later stage of the learning process. Learners’ language skills and expertise in their home language can be further developed for use in formal academic contexts more especially in reading and writing for creative and cognitively challenging purposes (Heugh 2006). In reference to Jim Cummin’s theory of language transfer, she argues that learners are able to transfer cognitive skills from L1 to L2 learning but she cautions that transfer from L1 to L2 can only be possible if L1 is sufficiently established. In African education systems however, the problem that might impede L1 mastery in is the insufficiently established orthographies, for all the L1 hence learners are not likely to achieve sufficiency in their L1. Similarly, they argue that learners understand better in a familiar language and are able to participate in the learning process. Unfamiliar languages force teachers to use traditional and teacher-centred teaching methods such as chorus, repetition, memorization and recall and learners are reduced to passive listeners (Alidou and Brock-ute 2006). They cite an example from Tanzania where a secondary school teacher confesses that she has to code switch to Kiswahili to have her students participate in learning or make the class a bit lively.

The use of indigenous language for instruction promotes culture and identity of the people. It facilitates the integration of African culture into the school curriculum thus creating a culturally sensitive curriculum and develops a positive perception of culture (Alidou et al 2006). This will also ensure that the parents are involved in school
activities hence making the school part of the community. It is through indigenous languages that education can best perform the role of cultural transmission. Alidou et al further note that use of imperial languages as the media of instruction leads to differential educational treatments and consequently to the maintenance of socio-economic inequalities. It excludes the common man from participating fully in development activities.

Studies by Uwezo Kenya, a non-governmental organization, have shown that when a child first comes to school with vernacular as the only language the learner understands, we should not teach the child in English as no learning will take place. The learner will become disoriented, won’t adjust seamlessly to the school environment and won’t participate in the lesson. The child may dislike school as a result. It is important to teach from the known to the unknown to set a strong foundation for the learner. Since the learner already has a good foundation in the first language, he/she will grasp faster because concepts are the same whether taught in English, Kiswahili or mother tongue. English should be introduced gradually.

The above arguments then puts the indigenous languages right at the centre of the education agenda. In order to harness the indigenous knowledge and education development initiatives across regions, then the most effective language for instruction has to be adopted and this should not be the former colonial languages, but the indigenous languages of the people. This however has to be backed up by massive involvement of all the people, not a particular group such as the elite.

4. METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach to explore the views of teachers, parents, and language specialists with regard to the renewed directive to the use of MT as a language of instruction in lower primary school classes in Kenya. Since the language policy has been in existence for decades without notable success, the study aimed to find out if the policy makers had overcome the challenges that stood on the way to initial successful implementation. The study, which was conducted over a period of two months, involved individual interviews and focus group discussions with teachers and parents from different counties who represented both urban and rural schools. Counties represented include Nairobi, Machakos, Kakamega, Muranga and Kajiado. More data was sought from language specialists mainly university lectures, and staff from government bodies that are directly involved in curriculum development and implementation. Documents were also used to compare policy with practice. The study was not meant to generalize to the wider Kenyan region but rather, aimed to create an awareness geared towards bringing change in both policy decisions and instructional innovation.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. Parents

Parents’ attitudes towards MT use for instruction seem to be attributed to the pragmatic function associated with English. The parents who participated in the interviews expressed that, if students wish to succeed academically, they must speak and be proficient in English. This coincides with the notion that the quality of a person’s English is believed to be indicative of his/her intelligence and the number years spent in school. This claim cannot be disputed because in Kenya, performance in secondary school determines the future of the students’ academic career, and subsequently their future employment and success in life. Some of the parents’ opinions are illustrated below:

When they go for job interviews, they will be evaluated based on their English proficiency; not vernacular.

It is therefore evident that parents are more concerned with the end product, but not the process that leads to it. The lack of living examples makes the situation worse since the elites who claim to have benefitted from MT instruction in their early years at school, have themselves enrolled their children in schools that use English as the language of instruction right from preschool pausing doubts on the validity of the language. For example the following concern raised a parents’ focus group discussion indicates that authority might not have much influence on implementation.

…his (the education minister) children did not learn in vernacular because they went to private schools Why should ours be treated separately?
Although other parents appreciate the fact that the children would show greater interest in learning if lessons were conducted in mother tongue, they observed that factors such as lack of opportunities related to mother tongue use would stand on the way to effective implementation. They observed that English is a tool for advancement and power, one that enables people who are either poor, from rural areas, or both, to leave their communities for better prospects. Since parents want their children to advance as far as possible up the social ladder, they would prefer to take their children to private schools, which are more focused on English for instruction. Even those who sent their children to public schools indicated that if they had the resources, they would have their children in private schools that emphasized on English for instruction.

Further, lack of examinations in the local languages at the end of the course was found to be a demotivating factor. The research found some parents sceptical about the use of mother tongue at the early years of learning for fear of their children being disadvantaged if this system was not applied to all schools. Citing urban and private schools, they expressed that those schools that give instruction in English would always do well because the learners would have had a longer exposure to the language of examination. They saw the new directive as an attempt to stop their children from learning English, and to therefore marginalize them in society. In addition since the examinations are in English, a lack of understanding of the language would imply failure and an impediment to all personal ambitions and goals. In addition since the examinations are in English, a lack of understanding of the language would imply failure and an impediment to all personal ambitions and goals.

In ethnically mixed regions, the parents indicated that it would bring divisions among the pupils. Some parents argued that teaching in local languages may exasperate tribalism even deeper into the society, “We are already a highly polarised society and we should be working to change this”. This response was based on the tribal crashes that happened following the 2007 general elections. They observed that if possible, the children should grow up knowing that they were Kenyans who did not belong to a specific ethnic group.

Those in support of MT in instruction accentuated the importance of language in the articulation of notions of culture, history and identity by promoting indigenous languages as mediums of instruction. They expressed that most of the children who have not had a chance to learn in their language cannot appreciate the cultural values that come with the language and they attribute this practice to the current moral decay in the society.

Children copy foreign cultures because the education system has made them think these cultures are superior. Schools punish children for speaking their mother tongue and expect them to positively appreciate the local culture.

Parents also indicated that the use of vernacular would reduce truancy and dropout rates, and that would improve student teacher communication. This was based on the fact that children feared interacting with their teachers because of their poor mastery of English while others were even punished for using the ‘wrong’ language at school.

5.2 Teachers

Teachers reemphasised the claims that English is regarded in a positive light because of its history. Since English was associated with prestige and white collar jobs, the English language has developed a favourable reputation which led to its adoption as an official language.

Those working in cosmopolitan settings where Kiswahili was the lingua franca reported that it was challenging for learners to grasp concepts when instruction was in English. The teachers also expressed that teaching in a familiar language makes progress faster because learners can read ahead and continue studying even out of class.

One teacher participant cited an example of a lesson she had that week where she was teaching the composition of the Old Testament Bible books and it was so difficult for learners to grasp some of the Biblical names and terminologies like Ephesians. However, when she switched to Kiswahili, the learners understood “Wafeso” and fully participated in the lesson. She felt that learners perform dismally in exams because they lack proficiency in English.
If pupils are examined in their first language at this lower level, they will understand the questions and perform well. She notes that sometimes she has to read and interpret the English exams into Kiswahili for the learners to understand them.

Views emerging from the focus group discussions with the teachers showed a mix-up in policy implementation. Although the teachers claimed to be advocating and practising MT instruction, the exams they gave the learners were in English. They admitted that learners often had a challenge translating concepts learnt in local languages into English. “If pupils are examined in their first language, they will understand the questions and perform well.” Teachers noted that sometimes they had to read and interpret the English exams into the local languages for the learners to understand but they were not sure if this was the best approach.

As reported in earlier studies, the issue of learning materials in the local languages was pointed as the limitation to effective implementation of the language policy. The teachers expressed that availability of textbooks in the local languages would not only make teaching easier but would also make it possible for parents to be involved in their children’s education as they could give support with their homework.

In one of the focus group discussions with teachers from one largely homogenous rural school, it was observed that despite their knowledge on the benefits of the language policy, implementation was hindered by the attitude of the ‘locals’. Teachers who use vernacular in class were regarded as ‘unskilled’.

Being a village school, parents always track what happens in the classrooms. They assess a ‘good’ teacher by the language he/she uses to communicate to the children. The notion is that if the teachers themselves cannot speak English what would be expected of the learners? Sometimes we do the wrong things to save our face as teachers.

This dilemma then draws everyone into ‘an egg or chicken first’ situation. The question arising here is where focus should be directed: the parents who need to understand the benefits and relevancy of the language policy to child’s future prospects, or the teachers who should implement the policy in the classrooms amidst mixed attitudes.

5.3 Language specialists

Language specialists expressed strong support in the government policy to use mother tongue for the first three years of a child’s education. Well versed with current research on the role of language in education of the children, they confirmed that children learn better if they received instruction in a more familiar language. This is because it was easier to learn English and Kiswahili after gaining proficiency in vernacular.

Further, they observed that MTI is also a good way of preserving culture. When children learn in their language, they learn about their culture and use things in their own environment as opposed to learning using foreign examples, which they can only struggle to imagine, (e.g when teaching the alphabet, a learner can relate easier to ‘y’ for ‘yai’ (egg) instead of ‘y’ for yacht).

The participants were however sceptical about the preparedness for implementation of the policy. They were in consensus that much consultation was needed to bring all stakeholders on board as illustrated below.

Teachers and parents need to be sensitised on the benefits the policy will have on the learner. Teaching and learning material have to be prepared and availed for it to be successful.

Another emerging view was that Kenya was no longer homogeneous; a challenge that stood in the way to successful implementation. In the 1970s, this policy worked very well because intercultural marriages were few and people could use a common mother tongue. The country has opened up to intermarriages and movement across regions for economic reasons. “We cannot talk of mother tongue when we consider a particular locale”.

Echoing the views of the teachers, language learning experts, noted that teaching pupils in their mother tongue at the early stages of learning will make transition from home to school smoother. It will make learning a pleasant experience as the pupils will not be struggling to understand the new concepts in an equally new language. The language
they understand will facilitate learning and progress will be faster. They however observed that their input as experts was minimal a possible reason why the policy has not been institutionalized since its introduction in the year 1976. Staff from the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) that there were no well laid procedures to ensure theory was put to practice.

6. MATTERS ARISING

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5.4 The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD)

The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development is the national curriculum development centre for all levels of education, except the university. It makes curriculum for primary education, secondary education and, post-school education courses offered in tertiary institutions such as polytechnics and teacher training colleges.

Staff from the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) reported that there were no well laid procedures for follow up. Therefore mother tongue for instruction only remained a theoretical policy.

There are many schools in Kenya. It is not possible to send people to supervise the teaching in the classrooms. We expect teacher to be professional and follow the existing education policies.

This statement shows a disconnect that exists between educational policies and teachers’ practices. The body that is meant to be the champion of the language policy seems to have reached a point of despair. For MTI to be successful there must be strong support structures in place including input from a triangle of researchers, policy-makers and teachers. This will foster communication among the three key groups to establish a basis for practical utilization of existing skills and research results to change theory to practice.
7. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

7.1 **Parental involvement**

Parents seem to have a misconception that their children should be taught using English as the medium of instruction so that they can have access to better employment opportunities. This however limits their contribution to their children learning since they do not understand English, or are unable to read and write in English. The use of a familiar language for instruction facilitates parental involvement and strengthens community support for education (Pflepson, 2011: 2). To bring them on board, it is important that, parents are well informed about the benefits of MT in instruction and they need to be reassured that learning in the mother tongue will not hinder their children’s opportunity to learn English, which they consider a key goal of sending their children to school. Parents and communities should be included in decision making around program development and they also can contribute to materials development, provide support in classrooms, and conduct school activities.

7.2 **Language Advisory Centres**

Choosing between languages in a multi-lingual familial environment is neither simple nor straightforward. Some of the languages have various dialects and reaching a compromise on which dialect to use as the medium of instruction poses a logistical challenge. Everyone takes pride in their own dialect and there may be no acceptable rationale to select one over the other. The Luhyia language, for example, has fourteen different dialects, and only a kiNyore dialect dictionary exists. The challenge of regaining the confidence, motivation and will of the people is immense and cannot be overstated, in spite of how resilient the children may be. To put the policy into action, there is need for research on language perception and use in the different language communities of Kenya. In addition, Language Advisory Centres should be formed at the regional and local levels to raise awareness and inform communities about the benefits of this policy.

7.3 **Equal powers**

There must be a stronger move towards strengthening mother tongue education in order to provide a firm foundation for later education in both the indigenous and English languages. In this regard, Cummins (1981) suggests that languages have a common underlying proficiency. He argues that when concepts are learned in the stronger language, they can later be expressed in the second language without having to be relearned. The concepts known in the first language are, therefore, transferable to the second language. Language planners must give the former colonial language and indigenous languages equal functional status. If indigenous languages are used in teaching and in school subject exams, they will gain prestige, which will increase the need to study them seriously. Assessment must also match the language model used so that children are able to fully demonstrate their ability.

7.4 **Education system alignment**

Success of MTI would be pegged on education programs. The government needs to structure the education system to support the language policy. This includes considering language in teacher recruitment, pre-service training, and school assignments. One of the reasons why teachers have not adhered to the language policy is because they often don’t read and write the local languages. In order to teach effectively using the mother tongue, the teachers have to be able to read and write in the local language, which currently they are not. According to one of the teachers interviewed, due to the large classes they handle and limited resources, teachers often believe that their goal “is to cover the syllabus. It’s not their responsibility to make sure the children understand. Success of MTI therefore requires a marked shift in the ingrained beliefs and practices, which calls for intense teacher training and support.

7.5 **Materials development and provision**

Academics emphasize the fact that a lack of resources, orthography or of any such corpus planning for indigenous languages automatically privileges English as the medium of instruction. There is strong reason to believe that the cost of designing a new curriculum that will take care of all the Kenyan multicultural groups, training teachers on delivery practice and designing orthographies would put a lot of pressure on the already overstretched economy. Initial start-up costs for mother tongue programs may be higher...
7.6 Teacher attitudes

Education reforms are effective when they do not focus solely on implementation of a new program, but also focus on teachers’ attitudes and beliefs around that particular innovation. No education policy or intervention can succeed without teachers’ ‘buy in’. If teachers must change their practice in the classroom, it is imperative that we first address their attitudes and beliefs. According to Karavas-Doukas (1991), introducing a new program creates competition with “well-established theories of language teaching and learning which are the product of previous teaching and learning experiences, prejudices, and beliefs” (p.188). Since teachers’ attitudes and beliefs are deeply ingrained and often unconsciously held, changing them can be very difficult. Hunzicker (2004) notes that “Changing a teacher’s beliefs requires that new information be presented repeatedly over time, to the point that the person begins to feel disequilibrium between current beliefs and new information” (p. 45). This is where professional development programs play a key role. Through professional development programmes, teachers will have the opportunity to learn information about the new innovation, model it in action, and get the opportunity to practice using it, eventually leading to changed attitudes and beliefs about that innovation. Attitude change is thus a critical component for MTI policy to succeed.

7.7 The role of the Media

The media plays a major role in informing and educating the public. The subject on the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction has been widely discussed the national radio and television. For instance a recent prominent television host categorically announced during a live recording that “We must say no to mother tongue. Our children must learn English.” This was well cheered by the crowd, even though it was not the topic of discussion on his show. On radio the sentiments from people calling in have been the same. One of the callers intimated that she did not want anyone to go through the ordeal that is her life because of vernacular. She had failed two job interviews and was still jobless because, in her view, she had been taught using mother tongue and could not express herself well in English. “People should be taught in English, not mother tongue.” This was despite the fact that she spoke good English as she said this. The bigger concern, however, is the failure to distinguish between teaching English and learning in English. The other concern is that during such call-in shows, language experts hardly participate, leaving the wrong notions propagated among the public by uninformed radio and television hosts.

8. CONCLUSION

Different scholars espouse different views towards the use of MT as the language of instruction at lower primary school. Scholars note that the stigma attached to vernacular remains. In fact they claim that many indigenous languages will die out unless steps are taken. Despite these predictions, the present status of the vernacular debate is relatively clear, as the new educational policy highlights the use of MT against the continued prestige accorded to Standard English. Thus, while academics continue to predict a future of indigenous languages as the mediums of instruction, children continue to be taught in a standard variety of English. Teacher preparedness, resources, multilingual classes and attitudes have been cited as some of the challenges facing the implementation process. This calls for supportive and enabling language policy, development of local language materials, and teacher professional development and support. Finally we must address teachers’, parents’ and communities’ attitudes and beliefs about MTI so that they act as supports to the education system, rather than barriers.
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