

An Investigation of Teachers' Use of Language Immersion for Instruction in the English Language in Sub-County Secondary Schools in Bungoma County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study that was undertaken in 2025 that sought to establish the teachers' use of the Language Immersion model for instruction in English language against translanguaging for teaching English as a second language. The study was undertaken in Sub-County Secondary Schools in Bungoma County in Kenya and was guided by Swain Merrill's Output Hypothesis (1985) theory. The study employed the quantitative research design and approach using quantitative techniques. The study population comprised 16 teachers of English and 96 students taking English subject in purposively selected sub-county secondary schools. Questionnaires were used in quantitative data collection. The findings revealed that less than 25% of the teachers of English were using Language Immersion as a teaching strategy in English instruction as 37.5% teachers frequently used other strategies. The research also established that only 12.5% of the teachers felt that Language Immersion enhances Second Language achievement to a considerable extent. Only 18.75% of students indicated that their teachers do not use another language, meaning these are the teachers that fully embrace language immersion in the instruction of English. The study concluded that the teachers of the English language in sub-county secondary schools in Bungoma County in Kenya do not significantly use Language Immersion as a teaching strategy despite the current policy guidelines that demand exclusive use of English as the medium of instruction apart from when teaching Kiswahili language. This study therefore recommends that the Ministry of Education in Kenya should consider revising the policy on the medium of instruction as a paradigm shift in the teaching of language to include other novel strategies for enhanced learner achievement in English as a second language.

Keywords: Language Immersion, Pedagogy, Multilingual, English Language, Instruction

INTRODUCTION

From the 20th Century English language teaching has witnessed sustained professional and methodological debates amongst theorists, researchers and teachers of language with the assumption that English is best taught and learnt by the use of Language immersion model, without necessarily referring to the learners' First Language. Language immersion is a general term that describes the exposure of the learner exclusively to the target language in order to develop bilingualism and is flexible enough to adapt to various sociocultural and sociolinguistic contexts (Cummins, 2009). Language immersion is an approach to foreign language instruction in which the usual curricular activities are conducted in a foreign language (Bostwick, 2001) which means that teachers and learners use the foreign language which is the target language as the medium of instruction as well as the object of instruction. Learners in an immersion program acquire the necessary language skills to understand and communicate about the learning content set out in the school's program of instruction. The teachers and learners will follow the same curricula, and in some instances, use the same materials (translated into the target language) as those used in the non-immersion schools.

The English language teachers' practice and shift from monolingual to multilingual ideologies in language education however, has interestingly directed researchers' attention to a relatively new teaching approach (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). Wamalwa and Syomwene (2025) in their study in Kenyan secondary schools found that the

teachers of the English language subject overwhelmingly use translanguaging (TL) as a language teaching strategy for instruction in English, quite contrary to the policy guidelines. This shift and practice by teachers and their learners of the English language has undermined policies that recommend immersion in teaching language in class and may be a silent call for a paradigm shift in how language is taught in secondary schools. This study sought to investigate the role that Language Immersion plays in Second Language learning in order to inform the necessity of exploring other strategies in the English Language instruction.

Statement of the problem

English is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world (Wamalwa, 2016). English has gained the status of a world language for both international relations, national unity and national goals in education. The Medium of Instruction (MOI) in Kenyan schools is English (KIE, 2002). With English as the primary language of instruction in institutions of learning i.e. in schools, mid-level colleges and universities as according government policy, English has been widely used to teach academic content in all subjects. The 2010 Constitution of Kenya (NCL, 2010) however recommends the promotion of the native languages which may undermine language learning and teaching where Language immersion can only be effectively implemented through the school system that prioritises the use of English above other languages in a multi-lingual environment. Furthermore, there are substantial gaps in the knowledge and understanding in terms of the function and extent to which the use of language immersion, in this case, the use of English to teach, has influenced the teaching and learning of English in sub-county secondary schools hence, the need to fill this gap.

This research is relevant for the on-going debate on Kenya's language-in-education policy regarding the question of whether it is necessary or not to consider the role that language immersion plays in Second Language acquisition before exploring other new possibilities and approaches in multilingual education which is highly pertinent for disseminating knowledge, in education institutions.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this was to investigate the teachers' use of Language Immersion for instruction in the English language as a Second Language in Sub-County Secondary Schools in Bungoma County, Kenya.

Research Objective

The research objective of this study was: to investigate teachers' use of Language Immersion strategy for instruction in English language in sub-county Secondary Schools in Bungoma County.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Immersion concept

Language immersion is an approach to foreign language instruction in which the usual curricular activities are conducted in a foreign language (Bostwick, 2001). In language immersion, the target language is the medium of instruction as well as the object of instruction. Language learners in immersion programs acquire the necessary language skills to understand and communicate about the subject matter set out in the school's program of instruction. These learners are made to follow the same curricula as they use the same materials which are translated into the target language as those used in the non-immersion schools.

The Language Immersion concept as a language teaching and learning model has its most fundamental aim of putting learners in a language immersion program to immerse the students in a target language to the biggest extent possible in order to facilitate language acquisition (Nascimento, 2017) so in this approach, students have little opportunity to use that language outside of the language classroom because of the demands laid on it in the situation. There could be various reasons for the use of this approach in teaching language: one is that the language may be a foreign language. For example, English can be defined as a foreign language in countries where it is not the most dominantly used language *for generative conversation* in society, even though the language has made tremendous inroads into society in many ways, or it could be spoken in that society, but not

by the communities to which students belong for example, non-Francophone students in Canada; non-Hispanic students in a dual Spanish-English immersion program in the United States).

The origins and development of Language Immersion as a model of English language teaching

Language Immersion programs originated in Canada in the mid-1960s. The effort was as a result of the special needs of people learning French (Genesse et al., 1986). This was when the Canadian Communities realized that the education that their children were receiving at school was not adequate to enable them to communicate in a second language. This idea reinforced the concern about how to provide students with the necessary tools to learn and communicate in a language other than their mother tongue, which was not a new one. This interest was then addressed in important governmental policies.

Many countries in Latin America made effort to design and implement policies and programs aimed at improving English learning (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017) and African countries like Kenya was not the exception. Language immersion programs in many countries are developed in elementary schools where the language of instruction is different from the students' native language (Genesee et al. 1986) as various positive aspects of immersion such as the improvement in language skills, cognitive development, promotion of meaningful output and feedback opportunities, better academic level and love for the other culture as some of its benefits. Internationally, language immersion has been noted as a merit in studying abroad which rests in its classification as a high impact practice (Burke, et. al., 2024).

Types of Language Immersion

The types of language immersion (Nascimento, 2017), can be characterized and categorized by the total time that students of language spend in the program and also by the learners' age and linguistic ability. Types that are characterized by learning time as outlined below:

The first type of Language Immersion is 'total immersion'. In this type of immersion, the language of instruction is the students' L2. Here, the learners spent 100% of their school day in their L2. This situation may cause some students to find it difficult to understand more abstract and complex concepts that only exist in the target language when they are taught only via the L2 or target language.

The second type of Language Immersion is 'partial immersion'. In partial language immersion programs, schools plan the learners' class-time to be shared between their L1 and L2 while in school. In such cases, it is an even split of time between the languages. Some students may prefer this type of language immersion situation with the main reason being that it may provide breaks from any difficult language situations as they shift between the times programmed for the different languages.

The third type of Language Immersion is 'two-way immersion'. This type of language immersion is also called bilingual immersion. This is an immersion situation where teachers of language make attempts to integrate both the students of the minority language and students of the majority language into the same classroom situation with the main aim of achieving academic excellence and bilingual proficiency for both language student groups. The teachers of language can use instructional languages in this type of immersion that can allow the two languages, but only one of the languages is used at a time. In this situation, students learn languages by way of interaction with their peers and teachers. This method of language immersion is popular language teaching approach in America (Nascimento, 2017) and currently a common practice against policy in Kenyan schools.

The benefits of Language Immersion in Second Language Learning on the global scene

The benefits of the language immersion program in institutions of learning are many and overwhelmingly positive according to Tamayo et al (2024). These benefits can be seen in the program's relevance to help teachers and learners to perceive immersion programs as a chance that people must use to learn or to reinforce a foreign language. The programs were spread to other countries, different from Canada, because they were proven to be effective in learning another language in a natural way and because they were not expensive. In countries that

embraced the language immersion programs, the programs were first created for various socio-political reasons (Genesse et al., 1986).

Rodríguez et al., (2024) in their research study on Immersion Programs found that language immersion was related to participants' perceptions about language improvement and personal growth. The study established that participants agreed on four key points: the importance of language practice, the improvement of the listening and speaking skills, the strong foundation students and graduates have in the school and the understanding that language is part of a culture. Their study finding agreed with another study by Baydak et al. (2015) who also argued that the idea that language was an enduring concept and relevant to the growth of autonomy, responsibility and personal improvement. In this study (Baydak et al., 2015), participants acknowledged that the importance of the immersion program was not only in terms of how much an individual could learn about the language in a classroom setting, but because of the opportunities it provides to interact with others and to learn. In the same vein, the immersion program helps the participants in their personal development and growth.

Another research study was carried out in Greece by Domma and Zafiri (2018) where differentiated teaching approaches that involved language immersion were applied to enhance students' oral and aural skills through the implementation of a task-based pedagogical intervention. Two groups of monolingual Greek students, were tested in English through a pre-test. The control group was taught through a conventional coursebook-based syllabus, whereas the experimental group was taught through differentiated instruction including immersion. The comparison between the two groups revealed that the performance achieved by the students of the experimental group that involved immersion was significantly higher. The results, of this research, suggest that the pedagogical intervention via language immersion used in the experimental group aided the development of students' oral and aural skills.

Lau et al. (2016) suggest that social interaction through language immersion is one of the strategies to help teacher to improve their learners' English language oral communication skills. They, (Lau et al.) also suggest that through the communication in an immersion program with other speakers, immersion enables the English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers to improve their fluency of spoken English as well as their vocabulary level. Some examples of activities which are found in universities in Malaysia include Global Outreach Programmes and Students Exchange Programmes.

Moreover, Somsai and Intaraprasert (2011) found several coping strategies of ESL learners in which the primary were: coming up with strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor by continuous interaction in the target language; coming up with strategies for understanding the message by speaking slowly to gain time to think and provide the right structures in the target language; and coming up with strategies for understanding the target language by noticing the target language gestures and facial expressions in non-verbal communication. Nteli & Zafiri (2017) found that immersion programme is useful to improve English language oral skills.

How to increase the use of Language Immersion in Schools

If the use of language immersion was fully embraced in schools, English would be stronger, because the goal of balanced bilingualism is likely unattainable in dual language contexts in some countries (Potowski, 2007). Potowski has several recommendations as further explained in the Kenyan context for strengthening English the minority language component of immersion programs. These recommendations include:

- i. School-wide policies and activities to promote the target language like the use of 'only speak English' while in school. Kenyan schools insist on the use of English as the Medium of Instruction.
- ii. High expectations of English proficiency incorporated into the grading system. This is not the case in the Kenyan context, but can be attempted by the insights provided by this research journal paper.
- iii. Supporting all school members in their attainment of the target language proficiency. This has been attempted in the national education policies that guide language use in education in the Kenyan schools.

- iv. Encouraging students' social use and investments in the minority language or the target language like many schools insist on pure use of English on particular days while in school for all manner of communication and interaction between teachers and learners while in school and,
- v. Increasing the proportion of target language-dominant students attending the school. This has not been attempted in Kenya because of the lack of significant school populations of English dominant speakers.

Other ways to increase the use of language in schools can include but are not limited to the following suggestions:

- i. integrate the use of the target language into the daily routine while in school
- ii. increase the consumption of media in the target language through the use of movies, podcasts, music and pre-recorded lessons,
- iii. practise speaking the target language daily through apps or language exchanges,
- iv. create 'Language Only' space in schools even with the use of labels.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Theoretical underpinning

This research study explored Merrill Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985). This theory argues that learners must put in a situation to produce the target language and not just hear it in order to achieve fluency. The Output Hypothesis argues that language production is crucial for learners' second language acquisition. The hypothesis also emphasizes that language learners will benefit from producing the target language as it aids them to identify gaps in their knowledge in that language and refine their linguistic skills.

Swain's Output Hypothesis suggests that language instruction should include opportunities for meaningful communication, where learners can engage in discussions, activities in target language roleplays, and collaborative writing. These activities not only promote output but also allow for negotiation of meaning and feedback, which are essential for language development.

This study employed the quantitative design and approach. Quantitative data was obtained from students and teachers. The study was carried out in Bungoma County, Kenya and selected 96 students and 16 teachers. These students and teachers of English respondents were selected from 16 purposively selected sub-county secondary schools.

Questionnaires were validated and piloted before they were used. These questionnaires contained both closed ended and open-ended items. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse quantitative data while qualitative data was analysed thematically.

The Cronbach reliability test was carried out on the questionnaires to test the reliability of the questionnaires. The reliability coefficient for teachers' questionnaire was found to be 0.75 for 44 items, as that for students' questionnaire was 0.70 for 28 items. A scale's internal consistency is quantified by a Cronbach's alpha (α) value that ranges between 0 and 1, with optimal values ranging between 0.7 and 0.9 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Measures were taken by the researcher to ensure that all the sampled and selected research participants were assured of their individual privacy and confidentiality and that their fundamental rights were protected Cohen et al (2007). The respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, as well as academic integrity. The research findings of this study were objectively and accurately compiled for meeting the purpose and the significance of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the study and the discussion.

To analyse teachers' use of language Immersion

The teachers' use of language Immersion for teaching English as a second language, in terms of whether or how often, they use immersion as a model for teaching and learning English as a Second Language (SL) in their schools was also analysed. The findings are presented and discussed below.

The teachers' use of Language Immersion

The findings in table 4.1 signify the respondents' opinions on the frequency of use of the immersion model in the teaching and learning of the English language. A scale of 1 - 4 was used, where 1 = Most Frequently, 2 = Frequently, 3 = Less Frequently, 4 = Never.

Table 4.1 Teachers' Frequency of use of the Immersion Model in the teaching of English

S/N	Use of language immersion for Teaching & learning English	1 Most Frequently	2 Frequently	3 Less Frequently	4 Never
1	I use only language immersion to teach English	2(12.5%)	7(43.75%)	5(31.25%)	2(12.5%)
2	I use immersion to enhance content delivery and understanding	4(25%)	7(43.75%)	5(31.25%)	0
3	I use immersion to pave way for educational inclusivity	1(6.25%)	7(43.75%)	7(43.75%)	0
4	I use immersion to enhance integrated activities	2(12.5%)	5(31.25%)	8(50%)	1(6.25%)
5	I use immersion to promote pedagogical creativity	3(18.75%)	5(31.25%)	7(43.75%)	1(6.25%)
6	I use immersion to make activities exciting and diversify learning and teaching experiences	5(31.25%)	4(25%)	5(31.25%)	1(6.25%)
7	I use immersion to minimize the supremacy and domination of the teacher in class	1(6.25%)	4(25%)	8(50%)	3(18.75%)
8	I use immersion to bridge the gap between learner ability differences	0	5(31.25%)	9(56.25%)	2(12.5%)
9	I use immersion to enhance and enrich teaching methods	1(6.25%)	8(50%)	6(37.5%)	0
10	Immersion provides greater positive influence to Learning English	4(25%)	6(37.5%)	6(37.5%)	0
11	Use of immersion in teaching and learning English stimulates individual and group learning	3(18.75%)	8(50%)	2(12.5%)	3(18.75%)

Table 4.1 above shows the results of the teachers' responses on how frequently they only use the immersion model in teaching their learners in the English subject. 2 teachers at 12.5% reported that they use the Immersion Model 'most frequently' as 7 who are the majority at 43.75% indicated that they use the immersion model 'frequently' in teaching the English language. Another 5 teachers at 31.25% stated that they only use language immersion 'less frequently' as only 2 teachers at 12.5% were seen 'never' to teach English using this model. Less than half of teachers in these schools frequently use immersion in teaching the English language.

The teachers of English were also asked to show how frequent they use Language Immersion to enhance content delivery and understanding. The results showed 4 teachers at 25% reported using immersion 'most frequently' as 7 teachers who are the majority at 43.75% use immersion just 'frequently'. Moreover, 5 teachers at 31.25% stated that they use it 'less frequently' as no teacher reported that they 'never' use language immersion while teaching their students in the English language lessons. All teachers of English it can be established by this study, use Language immersion at some given frequency, to teach the English language in their schools.

For those teachers who reported that they use immersion to pave way for educational inclusivity, 1 teacher reported using immersion 'most frequently' as 7 teachers at 43.75% only 'frequently'. Another 7 teachers at 43.75% said that they use immersion 'less frequently' as no teacher reported never to use immersion to pave way for educational inclusivity among their learners of the English language. So, for the 'frequent' and 'less frequent' teachers are the majority in the use of immersion for education inclusivity yet all teachers of the English teachers use the Immersion Model for teaching their students in class.

The teachers' reports on the use of the immersion model to enhance integrated activities provided the following findings. 2 teachers at 12.5% said they use immersion 'most frequently' as 5 teachers at 31.25% also said that they use it only 'frequently'. A majority of 8 teachers at 50% reported that they use immersion 'less frequently' as only 1 teacher at 6.25% did it to enhance integrated activities among the learners in the English language class. There was no teacher who responded as 'never' using Language Immersion. All teachers, this research study establishes, use the Immersion model in these schools.

The teachers of the English subject in the schools that were studied also reported on the use of the immersion model to promote pedagogical creativity among their students in class with the following findings. 3 teachers at 18.75% were found to promote pedagogical creativity by use of immersion 'most frequently' as 5 teachers at 31.25% do it just 'frequently'. A majority of 7 teachers at 43.75% used immersion 'less frequently' as only teacher 1 at 6.25% was found who 'never' uses immersion to promote pedagogical creativity among their students in the English language lessons. All teachers of the English language in these schools use the Immersion Model to teach their students in class.

These teachers of English who use language immersion to make activities exciting and to diversify learning and teaching experiences also reported how frequent they do this with their students in the English lesson classes. 5 teachers at 31.25% reported using language immersion to make their class activities exciting to diversify teaching experiences 'most frequently' as 4 teachers at 25% said they do it 'frequently'. Another 5 said they use immersion in class 'less frequently' for making activities exciting as only 1 teacher stated that they 'never' use language immersion to make the language learning activities an exciting and diversified experience.

On the use of language immersion to minimize the supremacy and domination of the teacher in class, the teachers of the English language had the following responses. 1 teacher at 6.25% stated that they use immersion here 'most frequently' as 4 teachers at 25% stated that they do it just 'frequently'. 8 teachers who were a majority at 50% were found to be using language immersion to minimize their supremacy and domination over students 'less frequently' as 3 at 18.75% were found 'never' to use language immersion to minimize their supremacy and domination in class.

Teachers of English also reported their use of language immersion to bridge the gap between learner ability differences. No teacher was found who used immersion to bridge the gap between learner ability differences 'most frequently' but 5 teachers at 31.25% were found to be bridging their learners' ability differences by use of language immersion 'frequently'. A majority of 9 teachers however at 56.25% were found to be doing this

but 'less frequently' as 2 teachers at 12.5% were found 'never' to be using language immersion to bridge the gap between their learners' ability differences.

For teachers who use language immersion to enhance and enrich their teaching methods, the research established the following. 1 teacher at 6.25% used immersion 'most frequently' as a majority of 8 teachers at 50% used it 'frequently'. 6 teachers at 37.5% used immersion to enhance and enrich their teaching methods 'less frequently' as no teacher was found 'never' to using language immersion to enhance and enrich their teaching methods.

This study also found that language Immersion provides greater positive influence to learning English from the following teacher responses. 4 teachers at 25% were found to be using language immersion to provide greater positive influence to their students' learning of English 'most frequently' as 6 teachers at 37.5% were found to use immersion 'frequently'. 6 teachers at 37.5% used immersion 'less frequently' as no teacher was found 'never' to be using language immersion to provide greater positive influence to their students' learning of the English language.

Lastly on the teachers' use of language immersion in teaching and learning English to stimulate individual and group learning, 3 teachers at 18.75% said they do it 'most frequently' as 8 teachers at 50% use immersion 'frequently'. Only 2 teachers at 12.5% use immersion 'less frequently' as 3 teachers at 18.75% were found 'never' to use language immersion to stimulate individual and group learning.

A more simplified view of the frequency by which teachers use the Immersion model in teaching their learners is presented in the chart of Figure that follows.

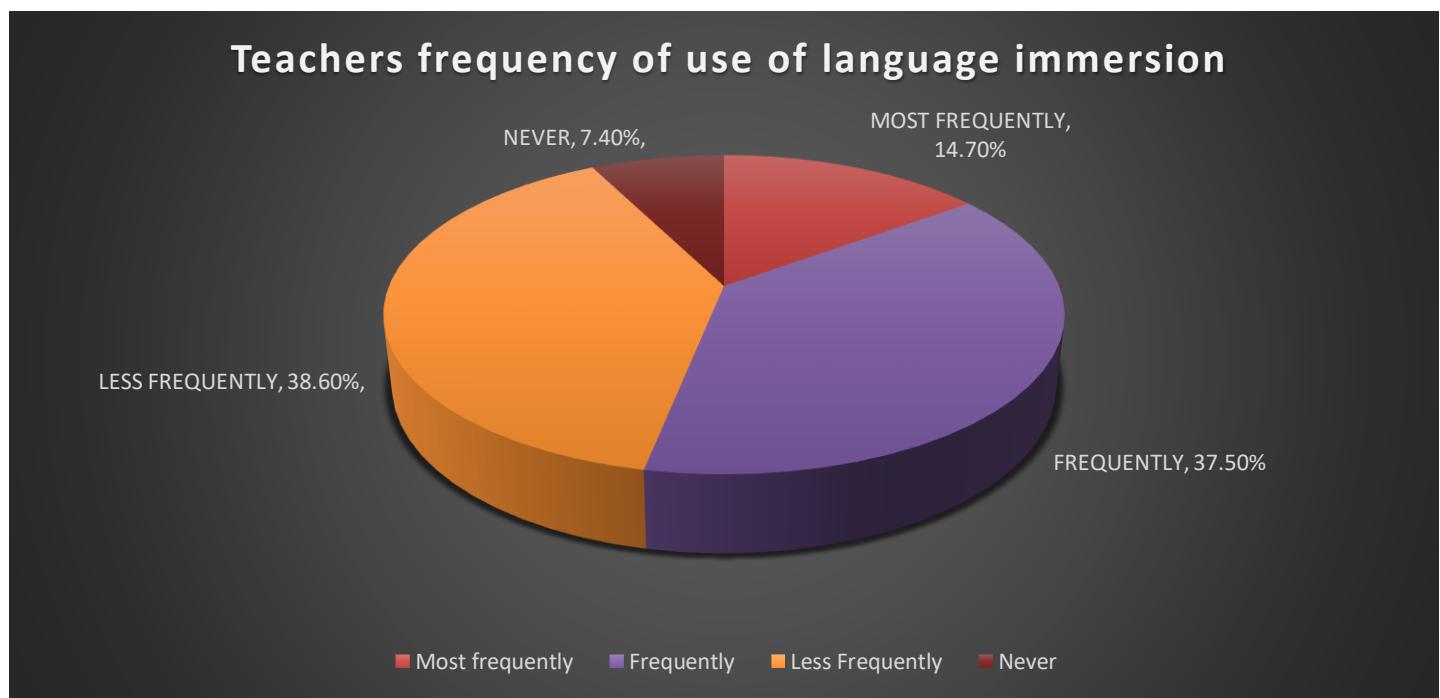


Fig. 4.1 Summary by Chart of the Teachers frequency of use of language immersion

The Figure 4.1 above shows that the majority of teachers of English who most frequently and frequently use Language Immersion to teach their learners are more than those who less frequently or never use immersion to teach their learners who seem to agree with Kang (2013) who reported that research studies draw the conclusion that the effect of immersion experience decreases the degree of the L1 transfer for early children as well as adult learners.

Learners' responses on how often their teachers use another language instead of English

The 96 student respondents were also asked how often their teacher for English uses another language instead of English during lessons. Their responses are presented in the next Table 4.12.

Table 4.2 How often teachers switch into another language while teaching English

Statement	Frequency	Percentage
Never	18	18.75 %
Rarely	56	58.333%
Often frequently	15	15.625%
Always	5	5.2%
No Response	2	2.083%
Total	96	

Table 4.2 how often Teachers the teachers of English use another language instead of English while teaching the English language. Of the 96 student respondents, 18 students at 19 % stated that their teachers “never” use another language while teaching English as 56 students at 58.33% said that their teachers “rarely do”. 15 students at 15.62% indicated that their teachers of English “often frequently” switch to another language while in class teaching them English as 5 learners at 5.2% as 2 students at 2.08% gave no response on this item in the questionnaire.

This finding clearly shows that apart from the 18 teachers who never use another language and the 2 who did not respond to this item on the questionnaire, a majority of the teachers at one time or another switch to another language while teaching English in class against government policy on the Language of Instruction in schools (KIE, 2002). Just over half of the teachers of English in the schools studied do switch to another language as reported by their students but rarely. Way below a quarter but quite significantly said the often frequently switch to another language in class as very few said they often do it.

This research study therefore clearly reveals that teachers of the English language do not fully embrace the use of language immersion while teaching in class significantly.

How often teachers use another language instead of immersion while teaching English

From the students’ questionnaire, students were also asked how often their teachers for English avoid the use of language immersion during the English lessons and their responses are provided in the Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Student responses on how often teachers use another language while teaching English instead of immersion

Statement	Frequency	Percentage
Never	18	19.1%
Rarely	5	5.3%
Often frequently	15	16%
Always	56	59.6%
No response	2	2.08%
Total	96	100%

From the table 4.13 above, 18 student respondents at 19.1% stated that their teachers “never” use another language while teaching English while 5 students at 5.3% said that their teachers “rarely” used another language in the English lesson. Another 15 students at 16% stated that their teachers of English “often and frequently” use another language while teaching English as 56 students at 59.6% stated that their teachers always use another language besides English while in the English language lesson. 2 students did not respond to this question.

From these student responses on their teachers’ use of another language while teaching, it can be seen that of the 16 teachers, a majority of the teachers of English as reported by their students use another language to teach English either on the always, the often frequently and the rarely basis. Below a quarter of the students reported that their teachers “never” use another language to teach English.

This finding emphasises the inevitable fact that the teachers of the English subject in secondary schools by practice, are using another language or translanguaging strategies to teach their students during the English language lessons. This is because Bi/Multilingual students interrelate, compare their languages, build strong multilingual mental networks, transfer linguistic and cognitive elements from previous language learning and, therefore learn new languages faster than their monolingual counterparts (Herdina & Jessner, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings on use of Language immersion in the teaching of English in sub-county secondary schools, it was established that teachers of English do not always use English by immersion in teaching their learners.

From the conclusions regarding the English language teachers use of Language Immersion in the teaching of the English language in sub-county secondary schools, this study recommends that teachers of English, teacher trainers, language scholars, the Ministry of Education and the Government of Kenya should consider revising policy through initiating further research on the need to revise the Language Policy in Secondary schools in Kenya in view of the prevailing practice and recommendation of the Constitution of Kenya on the promotion of supplementary approaches to the teaching of the English language to enhance the learning of this language.

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Conflict of interest

This research paper is for academic purposes and public consumption. The author declares no conflict of interest.

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