Language of Instruction Practices in Reference to Mother Tongue Policy Implementation in Lower Primary School Classes; A Case of Nyeri County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to establish the language(s) used for instruction in lower primary school and also find out to what extent various factors related to school, teachers and parents influence the language choices for instruction in the respective classes and schools. This is because in spite of language policy in Kenya stipulating that, learners in lower primary school to be instructed in the language of catchment area, studies in pre-primary school show that some schools are ignoring this rule. This comes at a time that issues have been raised concerning children being introduced to foreign languages too early before they have mastered the first language. Likewise in the recent past a debate has been ranging concerning instructing children in mother tongue at the pre-primary and lower primary schools. The available studies did not focus on language choices made at the lower primary level of education which is crucial transition stage to formal learning. Most of these studies addressed status of the language policy in general or focused on other levels. They have also been exploratory in nature and dwelt on either perceptions, attitudes, values, multilingualism or other aspects of language. The study adopted the Choice theory and Transitional language model in the theoretical framework. The study design was qualitative and adopted descriptive survey methodology which allowed for an in-depth examination of the situation. The independent variables were the factors said to influence the choice of language of instruction while the dependent variable was the language of instruction used at lower primary school. This study was carried out within Nyeri County in which Kikuyu is the dominant language. This county has experienced an outcry in academic performance particularly in languages, mathematics and sciences which has been attributed to the inability to express ideas. The target population of the study was lower primary school classes, teachers and their parents. A multistage sampling technique was adopted. Schools were randomly or purposefully selected at various stages; classes were selected through cluster sampling while teachers were randomly selected. Data was collected from private and public schools in rural and urban areas through lesson observations, interviewing teachers and focus group discussions with parents. A pilot study was conducted to pretest the instruments. Validity and reliability were established through triangulation. The qualitative data collected was analyzed using Kitwoods Qualitative Technique of Analysis to bring out the emerging patterns, themes and trends. Among other findings a variety of languages were being used in the classroom instruction with no consideration of the policy. This was seen to be influenced by choices made by the teachers, parents and schools' management and school locality. The study recommends a close-monitoring of implementation of language of instruction policy, training of teachers and education officers, community awareness and resource mobilization so as to benefit children at lower primary.

Background to the Study

Language plays an important role in early childhood development and education. It is the medium of communication and instruction between and among learners and teachers in school and other out of school forums. Language also serves as a means of self-expression and socio-cultural identity (Cummins, 2000).

Because of its centrality in the growth and development of children governments provide policy guidelines on language use in the learning processes in their education systems.

Language of instruction policies are designed to help maximize the benefits for learners during the instruction and learning process in school. Appropriate language of instruction policy in early childhood education potentially provides the children with a head-start and good foundation for social and educational progress. However, it has been observed that not all policies on language of instruction are implemented as stipulated in the guidelines (Menken & Garcia, 2010) meaning that language of instruction choices differ with policy.

A number of studies have pointed out discrepancies existing between language policies and instructional practice in learning institutions and even at the classroom level (Menken & Garcia, 2010; Murundu, 2010; Muthwii, 2002 & Tollefson & Tsui, 2004). The mismatch between policy and practice has been largely attributed to the multiplicity of players in the education process. Nonetheless, some studies have pointed out that teachers, in particular, play a crucial role in the ultimate choice of the language of instruction used (Chiori & Harris, 2001). In many cases the teacher's language preferences in the learning process take precedence over the language policy. The teachers' choices may be an outcome of interplay of factors such as individual language preference and competence, attitude and values, learners' social and cultural environments, parents and the larger community (Muthwii, 2002). The language choices made within a learning institution may be at variance with the recommended language policy in a given country.

The situation is more complicated in multi-linguistic states where other languages within the school and the neighbourhood also compete for space (Rubagumya, 1994). This is the case in some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, where in spite of the language policies underscoring the significant role of indigenous language(s) in early childhood education, other languages are still preferred (Ntsiki, 2009). For instance, Kenya's language policy stipulates that the language of the catchment area or mother tongue be used for instruction in early childhood education (Republic of Kenya, 2012). The Kenyan language of instruction policy is anchored on the premise that the use of language of the catchment area ensures that the child receives education in a familiar language (Gachathi Report, 1976 & Republic of Kenya, 2012). This notwithstanding, education field officers and researchers have shown that in the Kenyan case, children are more likely to be instructed in unfamiliar languages to the total disregard of the language policy (Koech, 1999).

Studies have attributed the weak enforcement of the language of instruction policy in Kenya to lack of supportive child admission and teacher recruitment procedures (Ball, 2010; Mbaabu, 1996). In fact, knowledge of the relevant language recommended for instruction is not considered when recruiting teachers who are the key agents of the policy implementation process. Similarly, learners' linguistic background is not considered in admission to school in early childhood education. It is therefore common to find teachers who are unfamiliar with the relevant language of instruction in the early childhood classrooms. Moreover, some of the recommended languages of instruction are not examinable in the training process or even in the education processes. This could necessitate the use of unfamiliar languages (Koech Report, 1999) for instruction at this level.

According to Webb (2004), children receiving instruction in an unfamiliar language in their learning process in school are likely to be negatively affected – poor academic achievement, and limited cognitive growth, emotional insecurity, low sense of self worth and inability to participate effectively in the educational process. This could lead to poor adjustment to school or even high rate of illiteracy as was experienced in India due to continued use of English (foreign language) in spite of existing policy in favour of local languages (Annamalai, 2004).

The current study sought to find out the current language of instruction situation in early childhood education in Kenyan. An in-depth examination of language of instruction choices in Kenyan classrooms could help inform the language policy implementation process in Kenya. This may help curb wastage in early childhood education and consequently in the entire education system. The study results may help in identifying policy gaps and provide information for the formulation of intervention measures for successful adoption of the language of ins-

truction policy in early childhood education.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Nyeri County.The region was selected because in an earlier study on vocabulary spurt occurrence in the Kikuyu language (Githinji, 2007), it was noted that majority of children had undergone a vocabulary spurt within the expected age of 18 to 24 months. This implied normal development. However, it was not known whether the normal language development was sustained when children go to school. It's sustenance is dependent on choice of language of instruction. Performance in national examinations at primary school level in this area had deteriorated in the recent past (Ministry of Education, 2014) particularly languages, mathematics and science. As noted earlier teaching in unfamiliar languages negatively affects language learning and is likely to affect other subjects that require the same in transmission of knowledge and concepts. The target population was low primary school classes, teachers and parents of children at this level. This is because lower primary school is crucial transitional stage to formal learning and the level how foundation to learning is through language choices. A multistage sampling technique was used depending on the sample.

This study had both independent and dependent variables. Independent variables included factors related to school, teachers and parents. These were the type of school management in terms of whether it is public or private, teachers' language preference where consideration was on the language(s) the teachers prefer in formal lesson instruction and during non-formal communication with pupils and parent's language preference. The consideration in this variable was made on the language parents frequently used or preferred to use or to be used with their children. The dependent variables were the observed language or medium of instruction in a given school. The observed scenarios during lesson delivery took any of the following forms: Kikuyu, English, Kiswahili or a combination of two or the three languages. Other forms were code switching, code mixing and 'Sheng'.

The data was gathered using observation, interview and focus group discussion schedules. These instruments were considered most appropriate in situational analysis and collecting of in-depth data in this qualitative research. The instruments were pre-tested to allow for necessary adjustments and corrections on the selected items. Validity and reliability were established through triangulation. The researcher pre-visited every school and took time to be there to ensure that all the participants were familiar with him. The purpose was to remove any anxiety and develop trustworthiness. During the actual data collection the researcher started with observations, followed by teachers' interviews and then parents' focus group discussions. This helped removed possible biases that could arise from pre-empting the purpose of the study. If interviews and group discussions were carried out first the participants would get to know what the researcher was looking for. This would make them come up with acting strategies to avoid imagined mistakes and act accordingly. All the necessary ethical and logical considerations were followed. Permissions were granted and informed consent sought.

The data was qualitatively analyzed with some aspects of the data being analyzed quantitatively. A computer software package for analyzing qualitative date was employed. This is popularly referred to as CAQDAS - Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software. The CAQDAS programme allowed for categorization of the findings into common themes, trends and patterns that are the bases of the discussion of the findings. Quantitative analysis entailed frequencies and percentages. However, most of the data was qualitatively analyzed. Data collected through each of the three methods used was analyzed separately and then cross-checked. This helped to develop clear and thoughtful understanding of each set of data gathered bringing out the factors at play in the choice of language of instruction at lower primary school. Common themes and trends in line with the study objectives were categorized together. This allowed for further in-depth analysis through comparison of themes and trends. The results are presented using tabulation of the frequency observations, verbatim quotations and detailed descriptions. An adapted Kitwood's Qualitative Technique for Data Analysis was also utilized. This technique is useful in the analysis of qualitative data. It has been adapted and used in other studies (Koech, 2005 & Wambiri, 2007). It entails analyzing the data through various methods. However, in this study the researcher adopted only the following methods: Total Pattern of Choice by popularity of items, similarities and differences within the total sample of accounts according to certain characteristics of the participants, grouping items together by reasons given by the respondents relating to a common theme, cross-

checking to identify the recurring themes and trends and exploration of anticipated occurrence to discover the underlying reasons for likely omission.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Choices of language of instruction in lower primary school across classes

The language used for instruction varied with school management, locality and across classes. It was observed that none of the schools studied adhered to the national language policy in education. Instead a mixture of Gĩkũyũ, Kiswahili and English was the main strategy used for instruction in lower primary school. This was with an exception of one of the high cost private schools where there was a heavy slant towards the use of English language.

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of language(s) of instruction used in across classes

Type of Language/ medium of instruction	Schools													Grand Total	
	Public						Private								
	Rural (A)		Urban (B)		Total		Rural (C)		Urban (D)		Total				
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Gĩkũyũ	181	**14**	43	**3**	224	**8**	23	**2**	11	**1**	34	**1**	258	**5**
Kiswahili	211	**17**	309	**22**	520	**20**	334	**24**	211	**17**	545	**21**	1065	**20**
English	193	**15**	256	**19**	449	**17**	298	**21**	847	**67**	1145	**43**	1594	**30**
Code-switching	411	**32**	415	**30**	826	**31**	375	**26**	115	**9**	490	**18**	1316	**24**
Code mixing	282	**22**	339	**25**	621	**23**	373	**26**	66	**5**	439	**16**	1060	**20**
Sheng'	0	**0**	20	**1**	20	**1**	17	**1**	19	**1**	36	**1**	56	**1**
Total	1278	**100**	1382	**100**	2660	**100**	1420	**100**	1269	**100**	2689	**100**	5349	**100**

The results indicate that overall, schools in the sampled area demonstrated higher use of English (30%) followed by code-switching (24%), code-mixing (20%), Kiswahili (20%), Kikuyu (5%) and sheng (1%). English was more popular than the other languages. Kikuyu and Kiswahili were the least popular. The results thus show that there is an outright deviation from the ministry of education's policy guidelines that recommend the use of the language of catchment area for instruction in standards one to three. The popularity of use of English can be explained by the fact that for a long period of time it has been the only recognized official language and the education process is viewed as a training ground for preparation for formal employment. The teachers likewise reported that it was easier to conduct lessons in English than Kiswahili. The mixing of languages during the lesson did not support their claim. It can be noted that it is only recently that the Kenyan Constitution (Republic of Kenya, 2010) recognized Kiswahili as an official language but it is yet to be operationalized as communication in official circles is still conducted in English. Nonetheless, the fact that it only took thirty percent of the total observations means that it may be popular but insufficient as a language of instruction in early childhood.

Use of language of catchment area, Gĩkũyũ, in lower primary school

The language of the catchment area, Gĩkũyũ, was rarely used as a medium of instruction without mixing it with Kiswahili and English. However, the English and Kiswahili communication had a heavy slant towards the Gĩkũyũ language. With all the teachers except one from Meru and the majority of children being from a Gĩkũyũ linguistic background, Gĩkũyũ ought to have been the medium of instruction. Further, three quarters of the

parents involved in focus group discussions were from Gĩkũyũ linguistic background with those from other linguistic backgrounds reporting that their children were speaking Gĩkũyũ. This therefore meant that these children would not have a problem if instructed in Gĩkũyũ. However a general decline in the use of the Gĩkũyũ language was observed as the subjects progressed through the lower primary level. The use of the language of catchment was also limited to social studies (12%) followed by physical education (11%), religious education (11%), while the rest music, life skills, art, science, mother tongue, mathematics, Kiswahili and English, recorded less than 10% with a difference of one point each. This supports the findings of Munyeki (1997), Kenya Institute of Education (2007) and Muthwii (2002) which claimed that only a small portion of schools in Kenya were using the recommended language of instruction.

A comparison of public and private schools in choice of language of instruction

Public and private schools varied in language choice in lower primary school. Public schools had adopted Kiswahili for lower primary school but agreed to be lenient incase pupils use mother tongue. Private schools had adopted a strictly 'English medium' only. Children from private schools were to be introduced to English as the language of instruction and communication from their first day in school. The observed differences between public and private schools could be attributed to the differences in language policies in the two types of categories of school management. Most private schools tend to ignore the language policy in education and adopt the international language, in this case English. This is in line with a study by Gacheche (2010) who reported that although schools in Nairobi were using English in instruction, 85% of standard two pupils could not read a passage in English.

Influence of teacher's language preference on choice of language instruction

The language teachers used in the introduction of a lesson indicated the language the teacher preferred for instruction. When pupils could not understand or respond in the language of lesson introduction the teacher switched or mixed with a language s/he assumed to be more favourable to the pupils "…I mix one or two languages to help them understand…" (Teachers Interview, School D). The pupils took the cue and responded in the new language. In public schools the teachers agreed which language was to be used in classroom instruction as well as the medium of instruction in school "…we allow the young children to speak Kikuyu if they can't express themselves in English or Kiswahili" (Teachers' Interview School, A). Some teachers had a tendency of using Kiswahili in class for non-Kiswahili subjects for example"…head teacher kwa Kiswahili ni nani" in an English language lesson. The pupils in turn used the language the teacher was communicating in. This means that the teachers influence was observed in the pupils' language and in the school language. Teachers had tendency to use or switch between English and Kiswahili – these are languages of authority (Rubagumya, 1994) thus teachers as symbols of authority were likely to be more inclined to respond in English when pupils spoke to them in a different language. Teachers failed to understand that learners taught through the second language were likely to show slow social and academic progress Annamalai (2004). As noted earlier for children to cognitively benefit from the instruction in a second language he/she must have competently learnt the first language and consequently the second language (Cummins, 1976 & Stuknabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1976).

Influence of parent's language preference on choice of language of instruction

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of parents' language preferences by type of school management

Language	Public		Private		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
English	6	11	21	39	27	25
Kiswahili	16	30	13	24	29	26
Mother Tongue	23	42	10	18	33	31

English/Kiswahili/Gĩkũyũ	5	9	5	9	10	9
English/Kiswahili	2	4	3	6	5	5
Kiswahili/Gĩkũyũ	2	4	2	4	4	4
Total	**54**	**100**	**54**	**100**	**108**	**100**

The results show that parents in public schools preferred the use of mother tongue (42%) as the language of instructions followed by Kiswahili (30%) and combination of language that would allow for code-switching and code-mixing (17%) and English (11%) in that order. In contrast, parents in private schools had a higher preference for use of English (39%) followed by Kiswahili (24%), a combination of languages that allow for code-mixing and code-switching (19%) and mother tongue (18%). Majority of parents expected their children to be taught in a given language at a given class. Parents had been reported to have withdrawn children from public schools and taken them to private schools so that the child could learn in English. Some parents were equally concerned about the schools' failure to teach mother tongue. Respondents from public schools are categorical in the need for mother tongue; "rũthiomi rwitũ nĩruo rwega harĩ mwana" (our language is appropriate for the child – learning) Parents FGD, School A).

These sentiments were echoed by parents of rural private schools for fear of disappearance of the mother tongue; "…mwana atoi gikũyũ gũkũ toakihitũkwo ni maũndũ maingi mũno ma itũra (that the child will miss a lot that goes on in the neighbourhood if he/she does not understand Gĩkũyũ) (Parents FGD, School C). They feared that children would lose a lot of learning that goes on in the community if they do not understand mother tongue. Kiswahili was also embraced by parents as a national language and the language of communication across diverse ethnic groups.

The general belief that schools conform to the parental preferences is therefore not true. In fact as one of the parents commented during the FGDs "…the teacher was angry and told me that if I wanted my child to speak English, I should take my child to the academy" (FGD, Parents School B). The differences in parental and actual language choice can be explained by the fact that not all the schools involved parents in deliberations on language of instruction. The private schools made their rules and passed them on to parents. Ntsiki, (2009) notes that where parents are involved in deliberations, the language of catchment area is easily accepted as the language of instruction in schools.

CONCLUSION

This study has established that the policy on language of instruction in education in Kenya has not been fully implemented in the early primary school years. Although some rural public primary schools appear to be following the policy, there is complete overlooking of the same in urban schools both public and private. The mixing of languages witnessed during lesson delivery and the conflicting views on language of instruction among teachers and parents shows lack of direction in language of instruction choice. This raises concern on the quality of learning by pupils in standards one, two and three and whether they are benefiting in their language and the learning that ought to come with it.

The decisions on language of instruction in education and the process of implementing the same have been left on the hands of individual parents, teachers and schools. Some of these stakeholders are not well informed on the benefits of using local languages and the teaching of the same in early childhood. If the situation persists children may lack the crucial benefits of learning in a familiar language and knowing how to read and write in the language. This may negatively impact on their education and social life. The negative effects may spill over to generations and become a spiral social problem unless appropriate interventions are put in place. The Ministry of Education should come in speedily and take up its key function of enforcing the language policy in education to steer this country in achieving quality Education for All and prepare children linguistically for optimum participation in social life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for quality control

It was observed that the Ministry of Education officials had directed schools to have mother tongue timetabled. However, they had neither enforced the use of mother nor its teaching at the classroom level. There is need, therefore, for the Ministry of Education to monitor whether recommended language(s) are used for instruction in lower primary school classes. The Ministry of Education officers should also ensure that both public and private schools follow the recommended policies. It was noted that most parents and teachers were not aware of the language policy in education hence need to involve them and/or sensitize them. Similarly, the Ministry of Education should set resources aside to train individuals who can set examination at this level in the language of the catchment area. This is because, first, mother tongue lessons were normally sidelined because of their being non-examinable. Second, except for Kiswahili all the examinations in lower primary school are set in English.

Recommendations for curriculum implementers

Among the officers deployed to implement the policies in education, there should be some who understand the language of the catchment area. This is because it would be difficult to enforce and monitor language policy implementation if one does not understand the language of the catchment area. Such individual(s) must be experts in that language.

Teachers expressed the likely challenge of teaching in and teaching mother tongue due to lack of training. The Ministry of Education ought to organize in-service training for all teachers required to teach lower primary school. Such a course should focus on reasons for failure to use mother tongue, available mother tongue resources and the way forward in use of mother tongue.

Recommendations for curriculum developers

Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) is mandated by the Ministry of Education to produce resource materials that are not popular with publishers. The institute should therefore ensure that there are enough teachers' guide books, course books, class readers as well as charts and posters among other materials. The KICD should translate the mother tongue syllabus into all the languages that ought to be taught and used in the instruction in lower primary school classes.

Recommendations for further research

Further research can be carried out on the linguistic environments at home since children from the same geographical area may not necessarily be using the same language at home. This is because such languages are likely to influence classroom language. It would also be important to study the Parents Teachers Association (PTA) knowledge of education policies and curriculum in general and language policy in particular. This is because although they are charged with the duty of implementing education, majority of parents and teachers were not aware of the language policy. Likewise teachers' level of literacy in mother tongue, Gĩkũyũ, should be studied because some had expressed difficult in reading the language. It would be difficulties to use and teach in a language one cannot read. Similarly educational officers' knowledge of the language(s) they are expected to implement should be examined.

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