



The role of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in Kenya

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 5 March 2015;

Received in revised form:
15 March 2015;

Accepted: 2 April 2015;

Keywords

Mother Tongue,
Stakeholder,
Ethnic division.

ABSTRACT

The Kenyan government's directive to schools to use mother tongues as the main language of instruction in lower primary school classes has received support and dissent in equal measure among the country's education stakeholders. Teachers unions and sections of Kenyan society fear it will promote ethnic division, and separate children along tribal lines.

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Introduction

Those of the contrary opinion have argued that teaching in vernacular can only work in rural areas where people from one tribe largely reside in the same place. In urban areas, however, where people from various tribes mingle, as pupils and teachers come from different tribal settings and backgrounds, will be a challenge to enforce the directive.

Another point being raised is whether there are even enough teachers to implement the plan. According to Kenya National Union of Teachers the country needs close to 80,000 additional teachers to boost the education sector. There is a further problem in the case of smaller tribes, like the Elmolos and Ogieks, as it will be difficult to get enough teachers who can teach in their languages.

Kenya is a country of many races and tribes. The tribes are about 41 in number, with the majority tribes being the kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, Kamba, Kalenjin and the Abagusii. The languages of these tribes are not mutually intelligible. The country is therefore a multilingual society. It was a colony of the Great Britain until 1963 when it attained independence.

During the colonial period, English was used as the language of instruction in schools and also in administration. For one to be employed in the civil service, he/she must pass in the English language in the school examinations.

On the attainment of independence, this state of affairs had been established. English was used in the schools but when children go home, they revert to their mother tongue. This switch from one language to another by the student was seen as posing problems to the learner and that it tended to widen the gap between home and school. It was further seen as hampering effective learning on the part of the learner, calls were therefore made for the introduction of the mother tongue (M.T) as the medium of instruction.

In 1967, an experimental course was undertaken by the ministry of education (Whiteley, 1974) in the primary schools. The mother tongue was used as the medium of instruction to teach pupils in the first two years of their lower primary education. Due to lack of thorough preparation in planning, the experiment ran into problems. It was discontinued three years later, only to be revived again in the middle of 1970.

What then is the position at present?

In those regions that are linguistically homogeneous with no dialectal differences, the M.T is used in the schools. The M.T. is only used in the first three classes in lower primary school. It is used to teach numeracy and other subjects like history, arithmetic, English etc. It is also used for storytelling. In this way, it is assumed that the child will gradually learn and the initial shock of the home/school differences will be minimized. From class four onwards, to the university, English is used as the medium of instruction.

The M.T is the only used in those areas that are linguistically homogeneous; these are usually the rural areas. However, in the urban areas or those regions that are heterogeneous linguistically, Kiswahili is used as the medium of instruction in the lower class up to class three, and then English takes over. Kiswahili however, remains as the subject to be studied even up to the University.

Teachers are considered qualified to teach or use M.T for instruction by reason of being native speakers, although they have no special training in this (Whiteley 1974:460). This is a problem which we will look at in section 2.

The use of the M.T as a language of Instruction has over the years attracted the interest of linguists language planners, educationists and many other scholars. Various theories have been advanced to explain the advantages of its use. Researchers have also been done to look into this matter. In the following section, the topic will be discussed under the following rubrics: the review of literature and evaluation.

The Theoretical Background

Review of Literature

Many scholars have called for the use of the M.T as the medium of instruction in educational institutions. This is because various theories have been put forward in support of this.

According to Panlston (1982), children have been found to learn the language they hear meaningfully spoken around them, no matter what language the parents spoke natively. If the children don't hear the language, they don't learn it. Similarly if the children were taught in a language they use at home, they are able to learn easily.

Indeed other researchers have claimed that the use of another language other than the M.T as the language of instruction has negative effects on the children skutnabb-kangas and Tonkomaa (1976) quoted the Cummins (1986:8) reported that the extent to which the mother tongue is developed prior to contact with the second language (L2) which is the medium of instruction, is strongly related to how well the L2 is learned.

Skutnabb-Kangas and Tonkomaa (po.at) further argue that the child's first language (L1) has functional significance in the developmental process and should be reinforced by the school.

The research findings of Cummins (1994:150) also seem to concur with the view that when students L1 proficiency is strongly promoted by the school programme, the resulting additive bilingualism appears to entail some subtle linguistic and possible cognitive benefits.

He observes that

"Students need and benefit most from the promotion of L1 literacy skills and the development of an additive form of bilingualism... for students academically at risk, there is evidence that strong promotion of L1 proficiency represents an effective way of developing a conceptual and academic foundation for acquiring English literacy"

The UNESCO document of 1953 quoted in Romaine (1989:20) which argued for the use of M.T in education, had profound influence in education policies in many countries. It stated that:

"On educational grounds, we recommend that the use of the M.T be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. In particular pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the M.T because they understand it best and became to begin their school life in the M.T will make the break between home and school as small as possible".

While agreeing with the document, Farold (1984:24) adds that the point is not so much that the school would be teaching the M.T as teaching other subjects in the M.T. And that recent experiences suggest that a better way to introduce a second language may be to teach it first as a subject using the M.T as a medium.

Similarly, in recognition of the importance of the M.T also, the EEC (Brunnels 77/486.EEC) quoted in Romaine (op.cit) instructed member states to take appropriate measures to promote the teaching of the M.T to the children of immigrant workers.

To strengthen this argument, "the Iloilo Project" in the Philippines Ramos et al 1967, Engle 1975 quoted in Fasold (1984:300) is given as evidence that M.T use as the medium of instruction is indeed advantageous. In the project the experimental group was instructed through their native language, Hiligaynon, for the first two grades and then switched to English. The control group was taught through English for six years in the traditional manner. At the end of six years, both groups were given a battery of tests in English. The experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group.

From these results, it appears that teaching in the M.T does indeed produce results. Paulston (1977:40) argues that the best medium of instruction and the best initial language of literature is the learner's M.T. Since a child is better socialized into the community and better schooled at first in his/her own language. A child will also learn other languages more effectively if he/she is competent in his/her own language.

While acknowledging the value of M.T in education, to language, and states that much of the work on the study of language in relation to social class and school failure has

claimed that the difference between home and school, language is responsible.

With the East African child in mind, Cameron (1981) agrees with the view that a second language medium offers daunting problems of learning to the child. He argues that the reason why East Africa has not produced mathematicians and scientists is because of the language (English) used for instruction.

In pursuit of the same theme, Cummins (1984) argues that children are unlikely to perform adequately in English if their exposure to English has been minimal. He goes on to state that underachievement among students is a function of

a) *Bilingualism*

b) *Lack of exposure to the school language*

c) *Linguistic mismatch between home and school*

d) *Cultural mismatch between home and school and other factors.*

Although one could argue that this state of affairs described by Cummins may only reflect those minorities in developed countries like Canada, USA etc. the point however has indeed been made that language has significant role to play in aiding (e.g. M.T) or hindering (E.G. L2) effective learning by the student.

The M.T helps to reduce the linguistic/cultural mismatch between the home and the school. Perhaps it is with this in mind that Davies (1985) argues that the school and the home must be linked so that the child's emotional and cognitive development can be facilitated through an easy connection between those primary domains.

In the same vein Ferguson (1985) observes that 'an indigenous language medium is culturally more acceptable and less descriptive and more likely to promote social integration and allow greater popular access to the institutions and instruments of power. A mother tongue perhaps can perform this role far better than a second language.

The M.T is familiar to both the learners and the teachers; this in itself is an advantage particularly in those multilingual societies of the Third World. Indeed Davies (op.cit) comments that given that for many learners in Africa, the only source of comprehensible input in language is the teacher, it is important that the teacher should be fluent and methodologically confident. With the use of M.T as the medium of instruction, fluency in the M.T on the part of the teacher and learners is guaranteed since both are native speakers.

However, better teacher training to enhance better methods of teaching is required and this will be discussed in section three.

With multilingual societies in mind, Cummins (1984) in his 'threshold hypothesis' argues for the development of a learner's L1 proficiency. Once a learner attains the second language, and that this proficiency, which in subsequent papers he refers to as 'basic interpersonal skills (BICS) and cognitive -academic language proficiency (CALP) would enable the learner to learn more effectively.

This hypothesis later supplemented by the interdependence hypothesis', Rivera (1984:3) suggests that L1 and L2 proficiency is partially dependent upon the prior level of development of L1 proficiency.

This is further shown by subsequent studies (Cummins 1981) in Rivera (op.cit) of immigrant students in Canada whose academic proficiency, for example, literacy skills in L1 was well established, developed L2 academic proficiency more rapidly than younger immigrant students. They also attained higher levels of L1 academic proficiency. Thus lending credence to the arguments advanced that M.T is advantageous to the learner.

Evaluation

For a small child to attend school where a different language is used is undoubtedly a difficult experience to adjust to. The arguments and recommendations by UNESCO and other scholars in favour of M.T as the medium of instruction in education seems to be plausible, though the practical implementation (discussed in Section 2) of these recommendation is problematic in some countries.

It is time that the shock which the young child undergoes in passing his/her home to his/her school life is great and if the language used in school is also different from the M.T the burden on the child is correspondingly increased. Fishman (1968:691)

The use of the M.T will promote better understanding between the home and the school. When the child is taught in the language of the home, what he learns can easily be expressed or applied in the home. Moreover, the parents will be in a better position to understand the problems of the school and in some measure to help in the education of the child. Thus the M.T tends to bridge the gap between the home and the school which enables the child to adjust and learn comfortably.

However, a different language used in the school as the medium would tend to widen this gap. Children feel insecure in another language for social reasons not linguistic ones (Paulston 1982) but there are times when a different language contributes to an already existing sense of insecurity which may further frustrate the child and may in fact even force him/her to drop out of school.

Rubin (1968) in Fasold (1984:306) attributes the massive dropouts in areas of Guarani monolingualism in Paraguay as a result of the use of Spanish as the School language. Similarly, Bokamba and Tine (1977) in Fasold (op.cit) who reports that in Ghana, only 5 per cent of all children who leave elementary school go on to Secondary school. While in Zaire, 30 per cent of the children who enter elementary school complete the first four grades. These authors attribute this to the inability of the learners to master the language of instruction. To counter this problem, they recommend that it is reasonable and well advised to initiate children to formal schooling and to provide initial literacy training in the M.T.

The arguments and theories put forward by Cummins (1984,1986) Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukamaa (1988) and Cameron (1981). Particularly, on the positive relationship between M.T or L1 and academic achievement seem to be persuasive and interesting, although some scholar (Dakin et al 1968:27) are skeptical about the superiority of the M.T over the other languages as medium of instruction.

The ideas advanced in favour of the M.T are quite thought provoking and the onus is with educationists and language planners and policy makers to look into them critically, because they are concerned with the proper learning of the child at school. If these ideas could be accepted and implemented in those areas where a second language is used as a medium of instruction, the learners perhaps may greatly benefit.

In multilingual societies like Kenya, to use the M.T as a medium of instruction would face many problems and the next section will look at the problems of implementation.

The Practical Problems of implementation

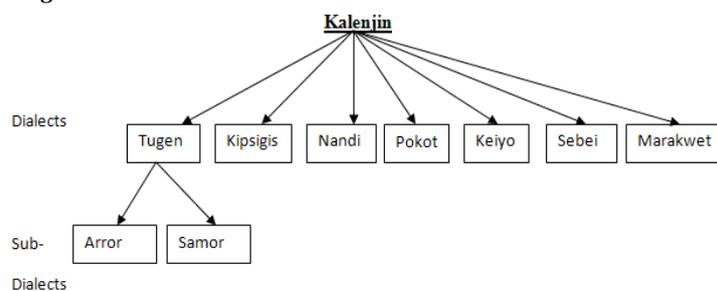
In the introductory part of the paper, it was noted that the M.T is needed as the medium of instruction in the first three classes of primary school, and that the teachers who teach the M.T have no training of any kind. This is a problem in itself because when M.T is introduced in the higher classes as the medium of instruction, it means that unqualified (untrained)

teachers will be used to implement the policy, thus positive results may not be achieved.

The use of M.T for instruction in school is only possible in the rural areas where most of the children may belong to the same tribe. However in those areas where the people were mixed with people from various tribes, like in settlement schemes, urban areas and so on, the use of M.T is almost impossible.

Similarly in those areas that are homogeneous linguistically we find that there are different dialects within the same language group hence we have problems of deciding which dialect to use as M.T for example, if we look at the Kalenjin tribe (which the authors belongs), there are several dialects as the diagram shows:-

Diagram



The people of the different dialects do not understand each other fully. The Nandi and Kipsigis for example understand each other well but do not understand the Pokot or the Marakwet. Similarly, the Tugen understand the Kipsigis, Nandi and Keiyo dialects but not Sebei, the Pokot or the Marakwet. By the same token there are also dialectal differences even within the Tugen itself as shown in the diagram. So if the Kenya government were to institute a policy where the M.T were to be used as the medium throughout the education system, the choice of dialect that can be accepted and understood by everybody would be a problem.

The same thing also applies to the other tribes like the Luhya and the Kikuyu (Kimani wa Njoroge 1985:330). When we look at the urban areas, the situation becomes even worse because there are so many people of different tribes, the schools are highly mixed thus to implement the use of M.T is a practical nightmare.

The choice of M.T as the medium of instruction also means that the books and other materials will have to be written and produced. On the other hand, publishers may not be enthusiastic to produce books which are not viable commercially, particularly if the books produced are to be used by a small community. At the moment, apart from a very few books used in the lower primary school, there are no textbooks of any kind written in M.T suitable texts, and reference books are not yet available in M.T in all subjects, hence educational materials will have to be translated from English to the various mother tongues which is very expensive.

The switch from English to M.T as the medium in the education system implies that teachers will have to be retrained and also in view of the fact that many schools will need many teachers, large numbers of M.T teachers will have to be trained. All this training needs a lot of money which the country cannot afford. Secondly, it also means that teachers trainers well versed with the various mother tongues will have to be found to teach these teachers, which again are not available at the moment.

The existing infrastructure like training institution colleges etc are not adequate and cannot cope with the high demand for trained M.T teachers if a M.T policy were to be brought to effect as the medium throughout the education system.

Kenya has a very strong influence from Britain the former colonial power and this colonial legacy like the use of English language for institution, employment and as the language of prestige and power is difficult to dislodge by the use of M.T its implementation would be faced with practical problems like the pressure of parents to have English used instead, because they associate English with positive career prospects for their children. Fergusson S. (1985:45) graphically describes this problem that...

'...in view of education...thus where a mother tongue is seen to have a low marketable value, and an international or national language a high value terms of access to greater socio-economic opportunity and improved life chances in the wider society, pressures may develop for the early introduction of learning in that language... though the mother tongue may be valued sentimentally, it may be perceived as irrelevant instrumentally.'

The use of the M.T implies that the assessment methods, criteria, etc will have to be changed or revised. And if many different mother tongues are used in the schools, the examination will have to be defined or redesigned to cover the differences in the curriculum. This is difficult and almost impossible to implement particularly if the examinations in the different mother tongues are expected to be as equal countrywide as possible.

The implementation of M.T as a medium of instruction not only faces such problems as linguistic-dialectal differences (discussed elsewhere) but also financial and political problems, like its introduction may be perceived as a potential threat to national unity. Also the county does not live in isolation, obviously it needs to communicate with the rest of the world, and hence the M.T could be seen as inhibiting this. Because of the limitation of this essay these factors will not be discussed further. In the next section attempts will be made to evaluate the M.T as the medium of instruction.

Evaluation

Possibilities

With the problems outlined in section 2, one perhaps may wonder whether it would be possible to implement a M.T policy. It is the view of the author that with proper research, planning and expert advice from linguists it is possible to implement it.

In view of the multilingual nature of the country research-survey on a macro-sociolinguistic level could be undertaken by linguists to find out which dialects are widely understood by the people and their attitudes towards them. Once a dialect is established to be understood by the others within one language, then the next stage is to look at other factors such as the vocabulary of the language itself, whether it has many lexicons suitable for instructional materials and even translation from English to the dialect. However, this is not a problem because many scholars (Fishman, 1968) agree that most languages are capable of inventing new words if a comprehensive corpus language planning is undertaken.

This survey would also give the number of those people who speak those dialects. Once this has been determined, the language planner can now decide which dialect can be used as the medium of instruction.

Because of the financial implications of implementing the policy, perhaps it would be feasible to have two or three accepted dialects (languages) like Kikuyu, Luhya and Dholuo to be used as the medium in schools on a trial basis in those regions where these languages are spoken. The experiences encountered in this pilot project would be useful in preparing policy makers

of what to expect if such a policy were to be introduced to cover the whole country.

However, before this policy is implemented, the opinions of the people must be sought, this is because the choice of a language as a medium of instruction is a sensitive issue to the community and other societal factors external to the school programme. These factors must not be ignored.

Recommendations

Before M.T is implemented as the medium of instruction, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development in liaison with the Ministry of Education should prepare and produce instructional materials beforehand.

Similarly, colleges should have prepared the syllabus and trained teachers in the teaching of M.T. The implementation of this policy means through planning, financial back up and good will from the government and the parents. This means that its implementation will have to take time. In other words, the entire necessary infrastructure must be available before its implementation.

The government owned publishing bodies like the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation and the Kenya Literature Bureau should do research on this and provide incentives to writers to write M.T books to be published. Other support materials could also be published like reference books, story books etc. in M.T to supplement the textbooks. In this way, the policy can be successfully implemented.

The bible society has over the years translated the Holy Bible from English to the various languages, and an alliance between this society and the linguists could produce good ideas and materials for the M.T use as medium.

In order to stall opposition from the people who do not see the long term benefits of the M.T in education, a kind of political-cultural education should first be started to make people appreciate its value. This can be done through political rallies, women's organizations, religious gatherings and the main media.

Most parents as discussed in section 2 want their children to study English because they see good career prospects in it. Also since the country needs to be in contact with the outside world, English should also be studied in the education system. A kind of two or three language formula should be adopted with the M.T as the medium and English as a foreign language. In this way, the M.T can serve the sentimental needs while English may serve the instrumental needs.

There is no denying the fact that knowledge acquired through M.T is more meaningful and lasting, as such the medium of instruction and examination must ultimately be in the M.T. in view of the scarce infrastructure mitigating against the M.T as medium, English should be allowed to continue as the medium of instruction until we have produced enough textbooks in the M.T and sufficient trained personnel to effect its implementation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the possibilities and recommendations made in section 3 can only be feasible if and only if the people can accept the choice of one or several dialects as the medium of instruction.

Besides the problems of producing instructional materials in the various dialects, there are other problems like lack of experienced officers in M.T in the inspectorate, and also the difficulty of transferring teachers from one schools to another, this is because a teacher trained to teach in one M.T may not teach in another school which uses a different M.T as medium.

Compared with the other languages, Kiswahili is way ahead in availability of books and above all centrality and wide acceptance by the people. Although strictly speaking, it is not regarded as a M.T by the majority of the people except a small minority at the Coast of the country. It is however a local language and therefore closer to the people. The subject is studied throughout the education system and therefore it is not a new language to everybody. Thus this could be a stronger candidate as the medium of instruction. In the urban areas it is now used as the M.T medium of instruction in the lower primary classes.

Kiswahili was used in Tanzania as the medium of instruction but it failed to an extent. This failure however, should not be seen in a negative light. The Kenya government should look at the good points and avoid those areas which Tanzania went wrong in their programme.

The language study institute in association with the departments of linguistics and African languages in Universities should be set up to work on a survey of the languages of the country. This survey will be useful to language planners, writers of teaching materials, future teachers supervisors of M.T teaching and language scholars in general.

Finally, to have a M.T as a medium of instruction in our schools is a good thing but we must not forget also our national interests. We have had a long tradition of education through English language. This is an advantage which should not be sacrificed for sloppy sentimental reasons.

For higher education English should be retained as the medium of instruction but comprehensive research should be undertaken to see into the feasibility of using Kiswahili or any acceptable local language as the medium. Research would hopefully provide the right and acceptable solutions rather than imposing any language policy in haste which might stir a hornet's nest.

Language planning should not be done with emotions but rather it needs a pragmatic approach with vision and foresight

and at all times the interests of the people and the country should be paramount.

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