

Literacy through a Foreign Language and Children's Rights to Education: An Examination of Kenya's Medium of Instruction Policy

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines whether or not English medium in Kenyan primary school education serves the intended instrumental and sentimental or symbolic functions. It is based on Standard Four (when English medium is introduced) Maths and Science classroom data in two schools from two regions of the country. The dominant home languages are Kiswahili in one region and DhoLuo in another. Premised on linguistic human rights and education as a basic human right, the data are analysed on four dimensions. These are: teacher talk-grammatical accuracy and appropriacy; types of questions; types of communication strategies and turn distribution. The paper concludes that teachers and learners are not ready to use English medium at Standard Four and the emphasis on the instrumental value of English is disastrous since very few Kenyans use English in their day-to-day interactions at work places. It recommends at least five years of Mother Tongue medium in primary school before the transition to the English medium.

Keywords: *literacy, medium of education, teaching/learning strategies, right to education*

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book- *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009) continues his campaign for writing in the African languages, and argues that language is critical for cultural identification (re-membering) and interlectual development (remembering). He does not see a chance of African human development ever occurring if education and African writing are carried out through foreign languages. In his words:

Memory and consciousness are inseparable.

But language is the means of memory, or, - - -

It is here, in memories very medium that various movements' quest for wholesomeness seriously falters. Their relationship to both European and African languages remains problematic (Wa Thiong'o 2009: 41)

The role of language as a symbol of identity is important in education since if the language of the school is the same as the home language then the familiar cognitive processes of remembering, reasoning and inferring, which are demanded by literacy, are done in a familiar language. In other words, these skills will be transferred from home to the school as a matter of course. It is in this conceptualization of language in education that this paper is going to discuss the use of English as a medium of instruction in primary school in Kenya.

2. WHAT IS LITERACY?

UNESCO has provided a new definition of literacy that moves away from the initial 3 Rs, which were seen as passive and relatively static. Literacy is now defined as:

- the ability to *identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use* printed and written materials associated with varying contexts (UNESCO 2004)

All the abilities suggested in the definition demand active participation by the learner and are also context-specific. This moves away the conception of literacy as a 'one -fits- all state to a relative achievement level appropriate to the relevant contextual demands. These skills are not acquired simply for utilitarian purposes. Those who acquire these literacy skills change fundamentally in their perception of the world and their participation in making their social-political world habitable. Olson (1977) cited in Street (1993), asserts that 'writing did not simply extend the structures and uses of oral language and oral memory but altered the content in important ways'. The connection Ngũgĩ establishes between language and memory is cited here too. This calls for two questions: In whose language is this literacy being acquired? Can that linguistic medium alter the structure of the "oral memory" of the acquirer? These thinkers consider the consequences of literacy not only in terms of social-economic development but also in terms of the individual's intellectual and cognitive change. For example, writing promotes the development of analytical activities such as recognizing logical contradictions and fallacies in a given proposition, in a way that oral communication alone may not provide.

Since literacy is so important in changing the lives of individuals and by extension, their community, literacy becomes, of necessity, an ideological issue. Literacy is then linked to cultural practices and power relations in society. The social structural arrangements then begin to determine who receives literacy in which language and how much of it. This has led to what is now called the 'politics of language education' (Alderson, 2009) or Critical Applied Linguistics (Pennycook, 2001). This is why Tollefson (1995) warns professionals (language teachers and curriculum developers) to be aware that

– power and inequality are central to language teaching and learning. What happens in the language classroom is intimately linked to social and political forces and practitioners must understand these links if they are to be fully effective in their work (p ix)

For example, The Report on Monitoring Learner Achievement Study for Class 3 in Literacy and Numeracy recently released by The National Assessment Centre notes that

One of the unexpected and unintended effects of the introduction of FPE was notable movement of pupils from public schools to private schools. Between the year 2003 and 2007 enrolment in private schools grew from 253, 167 to 889, 192 which was 251% increase. (Wasanga et al. 2010: 4)

The study has also revealed that at Grade 3 private schools performed better than public schools in both literacy and numeracy tests:

	Literacy	Numeracy
Public	 288.717	 289.524
Private	 469.197	 413.521

(Note: Total score was 600)

The study acknowledges the fact that the exodus from public schools to private schools is partly to escape the overcrowding in classrooms in public schools and also blames the disparity in the achievement levels between the two categories on the huge teacher – pupil ratios and scarcity of learning resources in public schools.

The finding of this study is an indictment of the politics that purports to increase access to primary education by declaring free primary education (FPE) but at the same time critically underfunding public schools so that middle – class children go to better resourced private schools and leave public schools to the poor. In the end, private schools will perform better in- end- of -cycle exams and proceed to take up most places in ‘good’ secondary schools and universities. This has entrenched a culture where the disadvantaged and the privileged reproduce themselves through the school system.

3. THE POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Kenya is a signatory to the international conventions committing countries to provide free primary education that followed the Education For All (EFA) Conference in Jomtien (1990). It also ratified the global initiative that generated the time-defined Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These two global initiatives have led to the *Kenya Vision 2030*, a policy document which outlines the national development goals aimed at moving Kenya from a poor-country

status to middle-income status (Republic of Kenya, 2007). The government has also established the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP) with a board which brings together leaders from the private sector and the public service, with the mandate to mobilize resources to fund education without relying on the Consolidated Fund only. From all these policy initiatives, the aims of primary education can be summarized as:

- a. To guarantee access to equality education by all, regardless of their class, regional origin, sex or financial status
- b. To provide education that is relevant to the contemporary social, cultural and scientific challenges.
- c. To ensure the provision of universal primary education (UPE) and attainment of Education for All (EFA) by 2015.
- d. To enhance quality of education through prudent use of existing human, physical and fiscal resources.
- e. To guarantee access, equity, quality and relevance through better management of service delivery.

These broad goals will be considered when we look at the data from the actual classroom practices as a 'reality check' on the success of the seemingly very sound principles.

4. THE PURPOSE OF ENGLISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

The classical view of motivation for learning a foreign language identifies *instrumental* and *integrative* roles of the target language. Instrumental role was seen as providing the acquirer with increased opportunity for a good job and a chance to move ahead in life; that is, possession of proficiency in a foreign language brings with it social and economic benefits. On the other hand, integrative role was seen as providing the acquirer with the opportunity to become a member of the cultural group, whose language he/she is learning. (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). This formulation fitted situations of minority migrant groups learning the majority language in their adopted countries but it has been found to be inadequate to explain why English, for example, is learnt in Kenya as a second language and used as medium of instruction. Since there is no native-language community to be integrated into in Kenya the integrative role is seen as *sentimental* or *symbolic* but not in a sense of language being used as marker of cultural distinctiveness and differentiation from other groups, since this is done by the respective mother tongues spoken in Kenya. As Davies (2009) puts it:

To be in the process of learning a foreign language (or even to be seen to be learning) is to be a member (or seek to become a member) of the literate, educated, professional and business middle classes (p. 49).

The choice of English as medium of instruction then becomes a critical political decision: that decision bestows on English the functional load of a standard language, a status that demands that it is structurally adequate (corpus planning) and socially prodigious and culturally acceptable (status planning). In other words, it must serve the instrumental and/or sentimental roles adequately, depending on the motivation of the acquirers.

In Kenya, finding the balance between instrumental and symbolic roles of English is often difficult and very illusive. The politics of language education has, therefore, sold English as performing an instrumental role since this is what could sell it to parents and other stakeholders. The instrumental role is attractive because all parents would like to see their children afforded modern opportunities to participate in the so called ‘globalized’ culture. This is done even when there is empirical evidence that children do not learn English effectively to enable them to acquire the requisite linguistic skills for meaningful participation in the modern economy (Wasanga et al. 2010; Nzomo et al. 2001).

What we witness is a clash between the needs of individuals (or a group/class) and societal needs. Educational needs are individual as well as societal needs. But individual’s needs are not always societal needs unless society declares them important enough to include them in formulating a national policy. In societies where the politicians’ needs seem to be interpreted as national needs, their needs dictate what the language policy becomes and professionals have to learn to live with that reality.

5. CLASSROOM DATA

The data we are going to look at are from a study carried out in 2005 in primary school classrooms to study the efficacy of English as a medium of instruction in Kenyan primary schools. We shall look at two Standard Four lessons, one in maths and the other in science. We are doing this for two reasons:

1. One of the myths about the instrumental role of English in education is that it is suitable for teaching science since it has a well-developed lexicon.
2. Standard Four is the foundation class for English – as – medium in Kenya.

Lesson one

1. Teacher: O.k. Quiet, quiet, quiet. *Haya¹*, let us welcome our visitor with a song, "Brown girl in the ring"
2. Pupils: "Brown girl in the ring tra la la la la. Brown girl in the ring tyraa la la la la la la. Brown girl in the ring tra la la la la, she looks like a sugar in the drum. Pla pla pla
3. Teacher: Now all that you learnt was about health education. So in class three we learnt about keeping our body clean; that is by washing our hands, keeping our hair clean, cutting our nails. Now today we are going to learn about proper use of medicine.
4. Pupils: Medicine
5. Teacher: Now somebody has said that if we eat our food with dirty hands we'll get germs and these germs will make us to be ...?
6. Pupils: Sick.
7. Teacher: Sick. Now what happens to a sick person. *Kama uko mgongwa huwa uko vipi²*? Can you run?
8. Pupils: No
9. Teacher: You can't run why? Why can't you run?
10. Pupils: You sleep all the time
11. Teacher: You go to the door
12. Pupils: Hospital
13. Teacher: You go to see the doctor so that you can be given what?
14. Pupils: Medicine.
15. Teacher: Medicine and that medicine will make you feel well again, will make you feel well again. Now if we become sick it is very easy to see a doctor so that we can be treated. Now the doctor will give you medicine. So the doctor will give you some medicine which is going to help you so that you can feel well again. Now we want to learn about the proper use of that medicine, that medicine which – aah – the doctor will give you. Now the medicine which the doctor will give you it is also called medicinal drug. Say medicine drug.
16. Pupils: Medicinal drugs.
17. Teacher: Now we have said that the medicinal drugs that we get are in liquid form, tablet form and also powder. But there is another one, the r is another thing that I had forgotten *nyingine huwa hatuwezi kutumia kijiko wala hatunywi na ... kuna dawa nyingine ambayo huwa tunatumia kwa³ ...? Yes.*

1 Ok

2 How do you feel when you are ill?

3 There is some medicine that we don't use with a spoon or we don't swallow and We also have other medicine that we use by

18. Pupils: *Sindano*⁴
19. Teacher: *Sindano*⁵ – yes, very good. Can you clap for him.
20. Pupils: (*Clap*)
21. Teacher: Now that *Sindano*⁶ is called injection. Say injection.
22. Pupils: Injection
23. Teacher: Now this injection is a medicine. Mmm. The medicine is in a small bottle and then it is pulled in that injection and the injection is given to the sister or you are given that injection and the medicine is driven inside the body using the injection. Now how should we use medicine? (*At this point the children got restless and started murmuring*) Can you keep quiet. Can you keep quiet. It is very important that you follow the instructions – can you keep quiet. What do you think will happen if you are told to take one tablet may be you take three of them?
24. Pupils: You will die.
25. Teacher: Who else has got another answer. Yes.
26. Pupil. *Utakisikia kizunguzungu*⁷
27. Teacher: *Eeh*
28. Pupil: *Kizunguzungu*⁸
29. Teacher: *Utasikia kizunguzungu*⁹; you feel a lot of?
30. Pupil: *Joto*¹⁰.
31. Teacher: You will faint. Another one?
32. Pupil: Add disease
33. Teacher: *Mwengine anasema utaongeza magonjwa*¹¹. Another answer?
Aah
34. Pupil: *Utalewa*¹².

Lesson Two

1. Teacher: So, today we look at equivalent fractions. Say equivalent fractions.
2. Pupils: Equivalent fractions.
3. Teacher: Yes, I have three circles here, one, two, three. Let us check. Look at them. Are they of the same size?

4 Injection

5 injection

6 injection

7 You will feel dizzy.

8 Dizziness.

9 You will feel dizzy.

10 Fever.

11 Another (person) will see that you will increase diseases.

12 You will get drunk.

4. Pupils: No
5. Teacher: They are not of the same age?
6. Pupils: No/Yes (Some pupils shout 'yes' and others 'no') (He redraws them).
7. Teacher: Let's try. See they are the same size. They are of ...
8. Pupils: The same size?
9. Teacher: So we call them a whole thing, a whole one whole
10. Pupils: One
11. Teacher: So this fraction are equivalent. They are the same. When you have two half's, three thirds and four quarters *then you have one whole one?*
12. Pupils: Whole one
13. Teacher: Like this one here. They are of the same size except that they are divided into different equals.
14. Pupils: Three is greater than six
15. Teacher: A third is bigger than, I mean greater than one sixth. A third is greater than one sixth. Even if we look at this diagram up here. We have a third up here. You remember that this one is divided into three...?
16. Pupils: Equal parts
17. Teacher: And the ... this one is divided into six equal parts.
18. Pupils: Parts.
19. Teacher: Take for example your father come home with an orange and you are only three, and some body else's father goes home with another orange and they are six. Let's talk of Onyango and Otieno. Onge yo¹³ here. Onyango has three children and Otieno has six children. So each one of them bought a mango (Correction) each an orange yes. Each one them bought only one orange. So Otieno goes home with his an orange there. Onyango and Otieno with his this side. He wants to divide orange among his six what?
20. Pupils: Children.
21. Teacher: Whose children will get the big or the bigger share? Dividing among three or dividing among six? Let's divide that orange ... Each one and three, four, five, one, two, three, four, five, six here. And thus one there are only three – one, two, three. Whose children will get bigger share? Onyango's or Otieno's?

¹³ There is no other way here.

The main arguments given for adopting English as medium of education are:

1. It has a rich vocabulary which is well differentiated for the teaching of concepts in all subjects.
2. There exists enough written material in books and other media
3. It is an international language.

In education through a foreign language, matters are complicated by the fact that the main (and often time the only) source of linguistic input for the pupils is the teacher. The learners, therefore, rely largely or solely on the teacher to provide them with the requisite linguistic skills to enable them to follow and enjoy lessons. The discussions will therefore cover the following dimension of the lessons.

- Teacher Talk – grammatical accuracy and appropriacy
- types of questions
- types of communication strategies
- Turn distribution

Lesson One

This was recorded in a school in Mombasa District (now Mombasa County). The school had an average of 100 pupils per class, with the exception of Standard Eight where there were 80 divided into streams. The average age of the pupils was eleven years. The school had pupils from different linguistic backgrounds and all of them spoke Kiswahili well. English was not the home language of any of them. The teacher was professionally trained at P1 Grade Level.

Lesson Two

The school is located in Kisumu District (now Kisumu County) and Dholuo is the home language of all the pupils, but some of them speak Kiswahili too. The teacher was a P1 trained teacher with more than five years' experience. The average age of the pupils was 11 years.

Teacher Talk

Teacher talk is the modified form of language the teacher uses to ensure optimal comprehension by the pupils. Since English is the medium of teaching other subjects, all subject teachers are required to modify their language in order that their subjects are enjoyed and mastered by the pupils. Some schools may have a language policy to help teachers and pupils cope with the linguistic challenges in

the school. For example, during the survey we learnt in one school that they had set aside one day in the week called Kiswahili Day, when everybody speaks Kiswahili. There may not be a special English Day because English is the designated official language of the school.

Although the teacher in Lesson 1 may pass as a fluent English speaker we realize that her language undermines her attempt to explain technical terms.

Teacher: Now that *sindano*¹⁴ is called injection. Say injection.

Pupils: Injection

Teacher: Now this injection is medicine. The medicine is in a small bottle and then it is pulled in that injection and the injection is given to sister or you are given that injection and the medicine is driven inside the body using the injection. Now how should we use medicine?

The convoluted explanation here underscores the difficulty teachers have in trying to express thought and information to the pupils. The teacher knows the Kiswahili term *sindano* and the English equivalent *injection* but the conceptual representations of these two terms vary quite markedly and this causes him to confuse the meaning of *sindano* as an instrument, *sindano* as *method* of administering medicine and *sindano* as medicine. This kind of muddled up exposition makes teaching of science difficult to follow.

In Lesson 2 the math teacher has the same linguistic problem in trying to explain to his class what 'equivalent fractions' really are. After a series of question and answer exchanges, the teacher concludes:

Teacher: So we call them a whole thing, a whole, one whole.

Pupils: One

Teacher: So this fraction are equivalent. They are the same. When you have two half's, three thirds and four quarters *then you have one whole one*.

Pupils: Whole one.

It is quite difficult to imagine if the pupils ever understood the meaning of 'equivalent fraction' from the explanation given. It is incomprehensible how '*when you have two half's, three thirds and four quarters then you have one whole one*'. In mathematical language this stretch of explanation suggests adding the listed items and getting the sum, but that was not quite what was intended.

On the whole, we can see clearly that teachers, who otherwise may know their subject well, lack the linguistic facility to communicate the knowledge to

¹⁴ Injection.

the pupils. The medium becomes a hindrance to expression of thought and hence a barrier to effective learning.

In terms of social appropriacy of language, we expect the teacher to pass on the polite forms of language during their conversation with the children. In the math lesson when the pupils ran out of patience with the lengthy explanation about injection and started murmuring, the teacher retorted by using harsh language, perhaps to stamp his authority. There were many examples of even harsher language in the lessons analyzed in the study.

6. TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Question and answer conversation pattern generally dominates classroom discourse and this makes it imperative to analyze the types of questions teachers ask and to assess their educational value. Traditionally, we talk of low-order and high-order question where the former ask for simple recall answers whereas the latter call for reasoning, inferencing or problem-solving. In both the lessons, the low-order questions predominate and that was true with all the lessons studied. The question is why this is so when teachers are trained to ask appropriate questions. The answer may be found in the teachers' inability to formulate higher-order questions in English or that they know the linguistic limitations of their pupils, who may not be able to sustain a description or explanation of any length in English.

Whatever the reason, the absence of cognitively-demanding questions in classroom discourse hampers pupils' linguistic development as well as their mastery of the subject content. There was a noticeable difference when pupils in the science lesson used Kiswahili.

7. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Communication strategies are employed by participants in a conversation in order to overcome comprehension difficulties on the part of the hearer or to overcome production difficulties on the part of the speaker. In foreign-language-medium classrooms, CS's come in handy when a teacher cannot find an appropriate word or expression to put a point across or when they realize or sense their pupils' comprehension difficulties. Communication strategies include code-switching, paraphrasing, avoidance, repetition and word coinage.

There is evidence of code-switching to Kiswahili in the science lesson and a switch to Dholuo in the math lesson. Code-switching as a communication strategy shows clearly when the teacher and the pupils seem to brighten up during the lesson and the pupils' contributions seem to be longer than the one-word answers we see in the English stretches of the discourse. It is noteworthy that in the science lesson, the teacher switched to Kiswahili when she realized

that her pupils were restless, after her painful struggle with the concept 'injection'. From the live observation the mood of the class suddenly changed for the better at that point. In the math class, the teacher resisted a switch to Dholuo until the point where he realized the pupils could not follow his explanation and had to warn them that there was 'no way out'; they had to get it right. The difficulty with which he tried to explain the concept 'fraction' betrays an underlying linguistic weakness. In the end the science lesson turned out to be much livelier in the end.

Paraphrasing was often employed by the teacher, for example, the Math teacher says 'A third is bigger, I mean greater than one sixth'. The science teacher says, 'Now what happens to a sick person? *Kama uko mgonjwa huwa uko vipi*¹⁵?' Apart from code-switching, the question is put in a different form.

Repetition is also often used by teachers to ensure pupils understand a question or explanation. For example, 'Medicine and that medicine will make you feel well again, will make you feel well again' (Science teacher). The Math teacher says 'Who can tell us what a fraction is? What is a fraction?'

Avoidance is not easy to pin down but some of the code-switches could be a strategy to avoid using unfamiliar English constructions. 'The medicine is in small bottle and then it is *pulled* in that injection – and the medicine is *driven* inside the body – 'can pass a avoidance since speaker has no exact word to express the idea.

8. DISTRIBUTION OF TURNS

In conversational analysis, turns are distributed along power lines; that is the more powerful participants take the lion's share of the available turns. In the classroom, therefore, the teachers who actually distribute the turns, naturally allocates more turns to themselves. According to Crookes (1990), a turn is 'one or more streams of speech bounded by speech of another, usually an interlocutor (p. 185).

In the science lesson there were 33 turns and 17 of these (slightly more than 50%) were allocated to the teacher. The story is similar in the maths class where there were 21 turns and the teacher took 11 (a little more than 50% too). It is important to note also that in all the pupil turns it is the teacher that asked a question and demanded an answer. That means that pupils spoke only when the teacher wanted them to. There was no instance of a pupil asking a question. This has a far-reaching implication in a foreign-language-medium classroom, and that is, pupils have very little opportunity to talk during class time and thereby having no practice in the use of the language. All they do is hear teacher-talk and hopefully learn the content of that talk if it accounts as educational input, at

¹⁵ How do you feel when you are ill?

all. Besides, since the pupil turns are generally one-word responses, active language use in class for them is minimal.

9. CONCLUSION

The paper started by linking literacy to the cognitive development of the individual and also globally linking it to the macro-politics of the country's education policy. The paper also cites some of the government policy documents containing what one might call the philosophical principles underlying the language education policy and practice. We have also provided empirical evidence from a government agency reporting the failure of the education system to provide effective literacy and numeracy at Grade 3.

We have also provided data from a classroom research in Grade 4, science and maths classes and all the evidence point to the inefficiency of the system. We can therefore conclude that:

- In the early years of primary school there is disparity between private schools and public schools which can be explained by socio-economic factors favouring the better endowed private schools. That is, the macro-politics of language in education favours the elite and disadvantages the lower classes.
- From Grade 4, when the medium of education moves from mother tongue to English, the problem is compounded by the language of instruction which is unfamiliar to both pupils and teachers.
- The quality of lesson delivery is seen to be severely compromised by the teachers' shaky mastery of English. The teacher fails to explain mathematical and scientific concepts effectively because they do not have sufficient vocabulary and communicative familiarity with the English language.
- The top-down or teacher-centred approach which is predominant in the classrooms can be explained by the teachers' attempt to cover their linguistic inadequacies by dominating classroom discourse and hoping that in the process something is learnt.
- The emphasis on the instrumental value of English is leading to disastrous consequences since not all Kenyans end up using English on a day-to-day basis at the work place. Many Kenyans learn English basically for symbolic reasons but rely on Kiswahili and other languages for survival.
- Finally, the use of English medium in our schools is inefficient and more efficient bilingual approach should be found.

This agrees with the conclusion of a science education researcher who argues that:

Language is crucial in the teacher's ability to explain concepts clearly to the pupils and also in establishing necessary rapport with them, and children need the necessary linguistic proficiency to be able to isolate the crucial explicit and implicit scientific information in a text. They must also be able to communicate their knowledge and opinions effectively in writing and orally (Mammino 2000:77)

The conclusion is that Kenya will not achieve the lofty educational aims if the status quo remains and that the current state of affairs amounts to violation of rights of the Kenyan child to quality education. The language policy in education and in particular, the choice of medium of instruction has far-reaching consequences for the development of human capital and econo-technical progress of the nation.

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