

Challenges other Languages Spoken in Upper Primary Schools have on the Teaching and Learning of English in Kenya

Joseph Komenn Kabbellow
School of Education,
Moi University
kabbellowjoseph@yahoo.com

Peter L. Barasa
School of Education,
Moi University
barasap@yahoo.co.uk

Carolyn A. Omulando
School of Education,
Moi University
o.carolyne@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper examines the influence Kiswahili and local languages have on the instruction of English. Specifically it examines how languages exposed to the learners in public primary school setting influence the manner in which they learn and use English. These are the underlying issues that emerge out of a research that was conducted in Marakwet District of Kenya, 2010 -2011. The study adopted Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory. It postulates that people use language influenced by various social factors and that the adult is a major facilitator and determiner in language acquisition and use. The study used the mixed method approach and descriptive survey design to collect qualitative and quantitative data. The study focused on public primary schools because they use mother tongue as the medium of instruction in lower primary, while English is used in upper primary as required by the Kenyan language policy. Simple random and purposive sampling was used to select 21 public primary schools from 70. Twenty standard seven pupils and one teacher of English were randomly selected from each of the sampled schools. The interview schedule and questionnaire were used for data collection. Data was coded and analysed with the help of SPSS through descriptive statistics, presented in frequency tables and thematically discussed. The study established that other languages: Kiswahili and mother tongue find their way into the classroom discourse, other languages used in school affect the learning of English, pupils' use of other languages other than English affects their pronunciation, finally other languages spoken cause incompetence in spoken and written English. The study recommends: teachers as role models should strive to use English all the time in their interaction with learners; teachers promote language proficiency among pupils in order to enhance the learning of English; schools should formulate school language policies to allow for meaningful learning of English.

Key words: *multilingualism, mother tongue, challenges, other languages, learning of English*

Introduction

Primary schools in Kenya are intrinsically multilingual and multicultural since both pupils and teachers bring their multiple identities and sociolinguistic practices into the school environment and classrooms. In almost all primary schools in Kenya, pupils and teachers communicate in at least three languages; their various mother tongues, Kiswahili and English. In lower primary classes, the varied linguistic situation is more pronounced since mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction across the curriculum except in English and Kiswahili as required by the national language policy.

Languages Spoken in Schools

Kenya is a multilingual country with over 40 languages Spoken. Barasa (2005) observes that, the Republic of Kenya has forty-one linguistic groups, while Kembo-Sure and Webb (2000) point out 42 indigenous languages spoken in Kenya alongside English and Kiswahili. The various roles played by each of these languages are determined by the language policy in Kenya. Kembo -Sure (2013, p. 50), describes the Kenyan language situation as follows: 'Kenya is one of the African countries which opted for a mix of a European language (official), an indigenous lingua franca (national) and local languages sharing the national socio-political space.' However, in social contexts these languages are used variously as determined by a variation of social, economic and political factors. As noted by Kamwangamalu, (2000, cited in Kembo-Sure & Webb 2000), these indigenous languages are spoken at home by family members. In the rural areas, especially in market places and shopping centres most speakers use either mother tongue or Kiswahili depending on who one is speaking with. If it is a member of the same linguistic group, the two will speak in mother tongue, they will use Kiswahili when the two speakers come from different linguistic communities with a different scenario in urban areas.

This linguistic situation finds its way into the school set-up affecting the way pupils learn and use English in primary schools. Most pupils in rural areas communicate amongst themselves using their various ethnic languages. They also speak in Kiswahili and English to a lesser degree. In urban areas, the situation is different as most of the pupils speak Kiswahili, 'Sheng', and sometimes English. It can

thus be argued that the languages spoken in Kenyan schools that is, mother tongue, Kiswahili and *sheng* affect the teaching and learning of English, this in turn impedes Pupils' proficiency and competence in the language. Kembo (1997) states that, language practice in primary schools is of concern because most of the pupils' English proficiency is either very low or non-existent by the end of primary 3. He further observed that while dealing with pupils especially in classes where English should be used, that is primary 4 onwards; the predominant language of the school environment is normally used. Omulando (2002) noting from a study conducted in Kenya observes that, teachers in secondary schools use English, Kiswahili and mother tongue interchangeably while in class during lessons and while outside depending on the situations and circumstances, for example, when giving examples for better explanation, and emphasis of certain points, ideas and concepts. Kiswahili is mainly used to break monotony after explanation of a concept, the teacher may crack a joke in Kiswahili or mother tongue. The use of several languages in schools impedes the learning of English among the pupils.

Language Teaching and Learning in Primary Schools

In Kenyan primary school, English and Kiswahili are languages taught and learnt from primary one up to primary eight, however apart from these two main languages, the indigenous languages or *mother tongues* are used as the medium of instruction from primary one up to primary three while from primary four up to tertiary education, the medium of instruction is English, (GOK, 1976). The rationale for this language policy was that; most of the children in the rural areas can only speak their vernacular language at the time of starting primary education. Yet, they are expected to have learnt adequate English at the end of seven years to be able to do certificate of primary education in English. The policy is silent on Kiswahili as a language of instruction, however it can be presumed to be one of the languages of the catchment area in urban areas, and can be used as a medium of instruction in lower primary. The competition between English and Kiswahili has risen ever since the latter was given a new impetus and re-affirmed as a national language of the Republic of Kenya, apart from being declared the official language alongside English (GOK, 2010).

The teaching and learning of English in Kenyan primary schools faces a lot of challenges; apart from learning English, pupils have also to learn Kiswahili as a subject in addition to the various mother tongues they already are familiar with. Some scholars point out that teachers are not competent to handle multilingual classes. Obura (1986) reveals that teachers in primary school are ill prepared to cope with the demands of trilingual classrooms in primary schools leading to generally poor standards, not only in English but in other subjects too. When first learning a second or foreign language, speakers do transfer many of the characteristics of their native language into the new language, Brown, (1987) calls this interlingual transfer. This is mostly the case in the learning of English in Kenyan primary schools as pupils encounter English for the first time when they join school.

Statement of the Problem

Kenya is a multilingual society in which as Barasa (2005, p. 3) observes, —the Republic of Kenya has forty-one different linguistic groups. Nearly all the language groups have their own distinct languages, some of which are closely related; this situation has influenced the teaching and learning of English in Kenyan schools in one way or another.

The Kenya government declared English as a medium of instruction from primary 1 after independence (GOK, 1964). This meant English was to be used for instruction in the Kenyan education system. Other indigenous languages including Kiswahili were not mentioned. This situation was reversed later through the GOK (1976) and the use of the predominant language spoken in the schools' catchment area for the first three years of primary education was introduced. English was also introduced as a subject from primary 1 to supersede the local language as the medium of instruction in primary 4. The situation still remains the same to date; this language policy implies that teachers should give instruction in the language of the catchment area from class 1 to 3 and use English as a language of instruction from class 4 onwards to institutions of higher learning, (Kembo - Sure & Webb, 2000). The language of the catchment area may be one of the over forty ethnic languages of Kenya. If this is a language other than English the official language, it is supposed to be phased out after the third year of primary schooling. In spite of the strong policy support for English, many children in Kenya have been observed not to be fluent in English, (Kembo Sure & Webb, 2000).

Pupils are exposed to several languages while in lower primary. This scenario negatively affects the pupils' proficiency in English language (Kembo, 1997). If there are several languages used at

the same time, then there is competition among the languages. One language tends to be used more than the others. This situation undermines the learning of English, thus leading to poor performance of pupils in English when in upper primary school due to limited exposure to this language in lower classes. This could be attributed to the fact that language determines how a person thinks as Tannen (2008) in Connor-Linton and Fasold (2008) observes that language frames the way a person sees the world. This is referred to as linguistic determinism; that is, the language one speaks determines how one thinks. If language shapes thought, it can be argued that it is possible for pupils to do things in the language they think in. The problem is that given the continued use of mother tongues either in the school environment or/and in class, this must surely have some impact on the teaching and learning of English. Therefore, this study set out to systematically investigate this position with a view to establish the multilingual influences on the teaching and learning of English in primary schools in Kenya.

Theoretical Issues

This study was based on the Social Constructivism and Language theory also referred to as Social Development theory of Learning by Levy Vygotsky (1978). It postulates that people use language based on various social factors within the environment and that the adult is a major facilitator and determiner in language acquisition and use. Thus the teacher in this study was viewed as the adult who should facilitate language acquisition and learning within the school environment and that there are varied factors within the school environment that determine how pupils and teachers are likely to use the various languages they are exposed to.

Materials and Methods

The study adopted the mixed method approach. Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) observe that it is advantageous because both quantitative and qualitative methods supplement each other in that, quantitative methods provide the in-depth explanation while qualitative methods provide the hard data needed to meet required objectives. The study utilized the descriptive survey design. Cohen and Manion (1992) observe that in a descriptive survey, the collection of information typically involves structured or semi-structured interviews and self-completion questionnaires among other instruments. This particular study utilised the questionnaire and interview schedule, which mainly yielded qualitative data..

In order to obtain the actual sample of schools that took part in the study, the study employed simple random sampling. Cozby (2001) observes that it is a sampling technique in which each and every member of the population has an equal and independent chance of being selected for the study. Twenty one (21) schools were selected for the study. This is 30% of the total 70 public primary schools, as observed by Kerlinger and Lee (2000), 30% is representative of the population to be studied. Stratified sampling was used to stratify the pupils into various classes, thus the selection of the standard seven stratum. Standard seven pupils were selected purposely to take part in the study because they are considered mature enough to describe their own language use patterns. Twenty standard seven pupils from each of the selected schools were randomly selected to take part in the study. The teachers who teach English in the selected schools and standard seven classes were automatically selected to take part in the study, thus the use of purposive sampling. In total, 420 pupils and 21 teachers participated in this study.

The main research instruments used were the teacher questionnaire and pupils' focus group interview. These were considered appropriate for this design because they were the most convenient to obtain data on languages spoken and used for instruction in upper primary schools and how they influence the teaching and learning of English. They mainly elicited qualitative data; however quantitative data was also obtained from some of the questionnaire items.

Results

Languages Spoken by Pupils

In the study it was established that 18 (85.7 %) of the pupils use other languages during English lessons, while 3 (14.3%) of them do not use other languages. This means that other languages find their way into the classroom discourse as summarized in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Pupils' Use of other Languages during English Lessons

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	18	85.7
Disagree	3	14.3
Total	21	100

Teachers who agreed that pupils use other languages during English lessons, said pupils used these languages in group discussions during the course of the lesson, others when the content being taught was difficult; that is they resorted to ask questions in Kiswahili and mother tongue. Others used other languages during oral lessons particularly those involving the use of role play, songs and riddles. Other instances include times when the teacher introduces a media in class which the pupils did not know its name and use in English, but they knew it either in mother tongue or Kiswahili. Those teachers who disagreed that pupils did not use other languages during English lessons did not give explanations as to why that did not happen.

Influence of other Languages on Pupil's Pronunciation Competence

From the findings it was established that 12 (57.1%) of the teachers strongly agreed that the use of other languages other than English affects the pupils' pronunciation competence, 7 (33.3%) agreed, 1 (4.8%) disagreed and 1(4.8%) strongly disagreed as summarized in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2. Influence of other Languages on Pupil's Pronunciation Competence

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	12	57.1
Agree	7	33.1
Disagree	1	4.8
Strongly disagree	1	4.8
Total	21	100

Perceptions of Teachers on the Influence of other Languages on the Teaching and Learning of English

From the findings it was established that 13 (61.9%) of the teachers strongly agreed that other languages spoken by pupils in upper primary affected the teaching of English, 7 (33.3%) agreed, while 1 (4.8%) disagreed and none strongly disagreed as summarized in Table 1.3. It can thus be concluded that other languages spoken by pupils in upper primary affect the teaching of English.

Table 1.3: The Effect of other Languages Spoken by Pupils on Teaching of English

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	13	61.9
Agree	7	33.3
Disagree	1	4.8
Strongly disagree	0	0
Total	21	100

From the findings it was established that teachers hold varied opinions on how other languages influence the teaching and learning of English. Some of them said that other languages contribute positively towards the teaching and learning of English. Other languages make it easy for pupils to learn

English as mother tongue and Kiswahili make pupils to relate what is being taught to their background, they also cited that pupils first think in mother tongue or Kiswahili when dealing with difficult content or complicated concepts, finally some said the use of other languages makes it easy for pupils to understand content taught in class.

On the other hand, those who noted a negative influence said that other languages affected pupils' pronunciation and fluency in spoken English. This was because most pupils pronounced English words as if they were words in their native languages; other teachers said the use of other languages encouraged the pupils to translate words from either mother tongue or Kiswahili directly to English. Other teachers reported that other languages made the pupils incompetent in spoken and written English, while others said they impeded the objective of teaching English for communication as they made the pupils perceive English as a difficult subject.

Languages Spoken by Pupils and how they Influence the Learning of English

The pupils' focused group interviews revealed that the languages spoken by pupils in upper primary were mother tongue, Kiswahili and English. The order of frequency in which these languages were spoken by the pupils was; Kiswahili was mostly spoken, followed by mother tongue and English in that order. On the question, whether other languages spoken in class by pupils affect their learning and use of English, most of the pupils agreed that other languages they spoke in class affected their learning and use of English, while very few of them disagreed.

Those pupils, who reported that the other languages they spoke in class affected their learning and use of English, said that other languages interfered with the writing of English composition. They cited that during writing, they experienced serious spelling mistakes especially words that possessed confusing sounds like /p/ and /b/, /f/ and /v/, /k/ and /g/, /t/ and /d/, others said they found it difficult writing words which had sound /θ/ such as in the words father, mother and them. They reported that they wrote these words as _fater', _mater and _tem'. Others reported that during speaking they used words from either mother tongue or Kiswahili when they did not get the correct English words to use.

Other pupils reported that their use of other languages especially Marakwet encouraged them to construct ungrammatical sentences, others explained that it made them to interpret questions poorly and hence write wrong answers and finally others said that other languages affected their pronunciation competence as they pronounced English words with deep Marakwet accent. It can thus be argued that Marakwet and Kiswahili spoken by pupils negatively influenced the learning and use of English.

Discussion

The pupils' focus group interview revealed that the languages spoken by pupils in upper primary schools were mother tongue, Kiswahili and English. Pupils were found to mostly speak Kiswahili, then mother tongue and English in that order. It was further established that pupils were mostly fluent in mother tongue, followed by Kiswahili and English in that order. It can thus be observed that linguistic competence alone does not have much bearing on the language most spoken by pupils, as it can be noted that the pupils mostly spoke Kiswahili although they were more fluent in their mother tongue. These findings support those of Kembo-Sure (1994) that linguistic competence per se is not a factor since most respondents claimed greater competence in mother tongue than Kiswahili, but use the latter most.

From the results it can be argued that the languages spoken by pupils in upper primary influence the learning of English, this can be deduced from the results of the pupils' focus group interview; most of the pupils reported that other languages they spoke in class affected their learning and use of English. On the contrary a few said that other languages they spoke did not affect their learning and use of English. Majority of the pupils said other languages they spoke interfered with their writing of composition, others reported that during speaking, they used words from either mother tongue or Kiswahili, others said, other languages made them write incorrect spelling and construct ungrammatical sentences. This confirms what Masinde (2005) established, that other languages made students to construct sentences in total disregard of English sentence structure rules. He also found out that students pronounced most of the English words with deep Kalenjin accent. He noted that this also affected their writing as most of them spelt words basing on their faulty pronunciation. These findings also support those of Saxena (2009) who found out that students in those classes which did not allow the use of Malay in class responded to questions in single words, short phrases and sometimes with silence or with some mumbling, while others provided a translation of English words in Malay. The above is reflected in the results from the teacher questionnaire which established that 18 (85.7%) of the

teachers agreed that pupils use the languages of the catchment area during English lessons, while 3 (14.3%) disagreed. This means that other languages find their way into the classroom discourse.

Those teachers who reported that pupils use other languages during English lessons said pupils did so when they were having group discussions. They also reported that the pupils also asked questions in mother tongue and Kiswahili when they found the content being taught was difficult. This is supported by Crystal (1987) who argues that speakers switch from one language to another because a speaker may not express himself or herself in one language so switches to the other to compensate for the deficiency.

This view however, seems to be contrary to that of other scholars like Cummins (1984), who believes that optimal first-language education provides a rich cognitive foundation that prepares for the acquisition of the second language, this means that the pupils can use either Kiswahili or mother tongue to assist in the learning of English, which in this case is the second language. This view is shared by Obura (1986), who recommends more imaginative methods of language teaching and materials production using locally available resources.

Based on the study theoretical framework, the findings established that 18 (85.7%) of the pupils use other languages during English lessons. These languages are mother tongue and Kiswahili. Teachers reported that pupils use these other languages when they were having group discussion during the course of the lessons, they also used them when they found the content taught by the teacher difficult; they asked questions in either Kiswahili or mother tongue. According to the teachers, other languages spoken by pupils in upper primary schools assist the pupils to learn English as they resorted to either Marakwet or Kiswahili whenever they encountered difficulties in English. Teachers reported that pupils first thought in Marakwet or Kiswahili when dealing with difficult content or complicated concepts. It can thus be posited that the different languages spoken by pupils in upper primary schools influence the way pupils think.

Conclusion

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that other languages; Kiswahili and Mother tongue find their way into the classroom discourse. Pupils' use of languages other than English affects their pronunciation competence. Other languages spoken by pupils in upper primary school affect the teaching and learning of English and interfere with their writing of English composition hence make them incompetent in both spoken and written English.

Recommendations

Teachers, as role models, should strive to use English all the time and minimize the use of other languages, if necessary, in their interaction with pupils, both in and outside classroom settings. Teachers should also promote English language proficiency among the pupils in order to enhance the teaching and learning of English in school curriculum. Finally, teachers should formulate school language policies to be adhered to by pupils in order for meaningful teaching and learning of English to take place.

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