

# **Language-in-Education Policy in Kenya: Intention, Interpretation, Implementation**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Kenya is a multilingual country with over forty different indigenous languages. Its language-in-education policy for early primary education was enacted in 1976. Subsequent education commissions have not altered its core content. Mother tongues should be used as languages of instruction up to grade three – assumedly taking its cue from UNESCO’s (1953) position that mother tongues are ideal for early education. English takes over as the language of instruction from grade four. The mother tongue policy applies to all schools except those in urban centres in which Kiswahili should be the medium of instruction. This paper presents findings of a study revolving around the policy statement, its interpretation, and implementation by classroom teachers, head teachers, and quality assurance and standards officers (QASOS). Findings indicate that there is a discrepancy between drafters’ intention, implementers’ interpretation, and operationalization of the provisions of the policy. The disparity between intention, implementer interpretation, and government silence seems to have bred both contempt and defiance for the policy by implementers, hence impacting negatively on implementation.

*Keywords:* policy, intention, conceptualization, implementation, defiance.

## **1. BACKGROUND**

There are more than forty (40) different indigenous languages in Kenya, in addition to Kiswahili and English. Other foreign languages spoken by a small number of people in the country include French, German, Chinese, Hindi, and Italian. The country’s thirty-two-year old education system is 8-4-4 i.e. eight years in primary school, four years in secondary school, and four others spent at university. The percentage of pupils and students who transit to secondary school and to universities yearly has, however, been consistently decried by various stakeholders (Mose, 2015). This is due to the fact that less than 50 % of candidates score an average of 50% in both terminal primary and secondary school examinations (Kenya National Examinations Council [KNEC<sup>1</sup>], 2015). Consequently, transition to subsequent levels is minimal. The examining body

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<sup>1</sup> KNEC: Kenya National Examinations Council is a semi-autonomous body in the ministry of education that administers final primary and secondary school national examinations conducted yearly.

usually attributes the cause to various reasons, including lack of enough teachers, lack of books, and poor English skills.

Language and learning scholars, however, attribute the trend to another possible cause; the language of instruction. The Primary Math and Reading (PRIMR) Report states that, “The language of instruction remains a complex issue for the Kenyan education system. Any attempt to scale up PRIMR activities without resolving this issue is likely to increase complexity during the implementation.” (2014:58). Other research reports (KNEC, 2010; Uwezo Kenya, 2012, 2013) indicate that literacy skills in English among children transiting to upper primary are insufficient, implying that basic literacy skills are acquired in mid-upper primary. Is the language-in-education policy inadequate to address the skill development problem? Or, is the policy inadequately implemented, or it is not implemented at all?

## 2. LANGUAGE-IN-EDUCATION POLICIES IN AFRICA

Language-in-education policies in primary level education in Africa are the norm due to the multilingual nature of the continent. In most polities, unfortunately, the policies are only on paper (Bamgbose, 2000; Heugh, 2002; & Roy-Campell, 2000); there is no actual implementation. Most countries use languages including English, French, and Portuguese, for teaching, and some from as early as grade one. Various reasons are advanced against the use of indigenous languages; lack of terminology, lack of books, lack of teachers, threat to national unity, and parental preference, etc (Bamgbose, 2000; Mose, 2015). Consequently, indigenous languages are left with peripheral roles in most education systems. Only Tanzania has successfully used Kiswahili in teaching content knowledge throughout the primary school level, though Zanzibar (a sister island) has just introduced the use of English to teach some content subjects from grade five, a move that contradicts diverse empirical research findings in support of the use of the mother tongue, or languages that learners know best, especially in primary education (Maalim, 2015; Qorro, 2009).

Language scholars from both Africa and the West have consistently dismissed the reasons provided above as mere excuses (Alexander, 1999; Bamgbose, 2000; Cummins, 2000; Wolff, 2006). They have, in light of compelling research in Africa, Asia, and America, demonstrated that mother tongues are the ideal vehicles of knowledge delivery; more especially in early child education. According to Cummins (2000), the use of a mother tongue to teach is not at a negative cost to the learning of a second language; the skills acquired in the mother tongue transfer to the second language(s) in the context of what he refers to as linguistic interdependence. A mother tongue adequately developed as a subject and a language of instruction therefore facilitates the learning of, for instance, English. The facilitative capacity is attributed to the

‘common underlying proficiency’ (Cummins, 1984) implying that languages share basic features at the deeper level.

## 2.1 LANGUAGE-IN-EDUCATION POLICY IN KENYA

The language-in-education policy for basic education institutions was enacted in 1976 by the Gachathi Commission. The commission introduced mother tongues as languages of instruction in lower primary. Previous commissions had indicated that these languages were ill-equipped to play this role (Ominde Commission, 1964). The policy articles relevant in this study are;

Recommendation 101: To use as a language of instruction the predominant language spoken in the schools’ catchment area for the first three years of primary education.

Recommendation 102: To introduce English as a subject from Primary 1 and to make it supersede the predominant local language as the medium of instruction in Primary 4 (Gachathi Commission, 1976, pp. 54–55).

For linguistically heterogeneous areas, referred to in the policy as peri-urban/urban or metropolitan areas, the policy states that Kiswahili should be used for instruction. Kenya is predominantly rural with many regions inhabited by specific linguistically homogeneous communities. The policy could therefore find easy implementation in this context. Justifying the use of mother tongues in early learning, the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE, 2012) states;

The pupils’ ideas and thoughts are in their mother tongue and will continue to be so, long after they have learnt to speak in English. To be encouraged to think for themselves, the pupils must be helped to do so in their own language (p. 147).

However, the policy is not properly implemented as indicated by various research reports (Mbaabu, 1996; Mose, 2015). For the policy to be fully implemented, understanding of the meaning and implications of the following key concepts is important: (a) peri-urban/urban/metropolitan areas, (b) the place of mother tongues in learning and concept formation, (c) language predominance, (d) language of the catchment, and (e) the overall principle underlying the language-in-education policy requirement. Concepts (a) to (d) above form the core of the policy and are the concepts that have been repeatedly used in policy documents to date. The first concept must be understood in order to determine which language should be used in which school; the second, third, and fourth concepts, so that teachers present knowledge in a way that learners will understand. Finally, the overall implication of the policy must be understood in order to, in varied circumstances, implement the underlying principles of the provision. Both QASOs and school teachers must have a

common understanding of these concepts to guarantee implementation of the policy. The concepts are referred to by various policy documents and research reports including the Koech Report (1999), MoE (2012), Mbaabu (1996), etc.

## 2.2 IMPLICATIONS OF THE POLICY

It is known in Kenya that specific language communities live in specific parts of the country. Gusii (Kisii and Nyamira Counties), for instance, is inhabited by the Ekegusii-speaking people. This applies to all other regions in the country; Homa-Bay, Siaya, Migori, etc, by the Luo; Bungoma, Kakamega, Vihiga, etc, by the Luhya; and Kajiado, Narok, Transmara, etc, by the Maasai. Except in town centres, the predominant languages spoken by inhabitants of these regions are, generally, Dholuo, Luhya, and Maasai respectively. They are highly linguistically homogeneous. It is in this context that the language-in-education policy was constructed. From my knowledge as a native of Kenya, the country is not predominantly heterogeneously settled as far as language is concerned; there are many regions with monolingual settlements in spite of growing urbanisation.

The policy was emphasized by the ministry of education recently (2014) and teachers were asked to use languages of the catchment to teach up to grade three. The circular further reinforces my claim that the majority of Kenyans live in rural areas. From a literature review on the policy, and for the purpose of this study, the following are the implications of the language-in-education policy;

- i. Mother tongues, for instance Ekegusii, should be taught as subjects and be used to teach content knowledge including subjects like mathematics and science. In urban areas, Kiswahili should be taught as a subject, and it must be used to teach content knowledge. Teachers should, for instance, use the words; addition, factorize, calculate, sum, in the respective mother tongues/Kiswahili.
- ii. Education officers need an understanding of what peri-urban, urban, metropolitan, and rural areas refer to. They should know, either through sociolinguistic surveys or research studies, language representations in the areas under their jurisdiction. They could make decisions on language predominance by studying school enrolment records, which indicate ethnic representations in each class. This further implies that some schools in some towns could use either a local mother tongue and others could use Kiswahili, based on the scale of linguistic heterogeneity.
- iii. Predominant languages imply that some places in Kenya could have low levels of linguistic heterogeneity, in which case one language dominates (e.g. Nyamira and Keroka as indicated in Section 4.1). For such areas the policy provides for the use of a predominant language. This provision is based on a second language learning principle; children easily learn a

predominant language. For instance, if a Dholuo-speaking pupil transfers to a school in Gusii, which is Ekegusii monolingual, he/she will soon learn Ekegusii. A facilitative factor here would be input (Cummins, 2000; Krashen, 1981). The child could, most likely, not want to learn Kiswahili whose input is restricted. Krashen states that language learning occurs, unrestrictedly, if there is sufficient input such as in immersion contexts, for instance, in Canada (for French students) where there is a natural communicative use of the target language outside the classroom.

- iv. Children using this mother tongue instruction will have developed sufficient skills in English by the end of grade three, a time when English instruction takes over. However, this assumption is contradicted by research. For an English second language learner to develop academic skills in the language to be able to learn in it, they need more than five years of learning the language. Because of the limited English language contexts, for instance in Kenya, it would take even longer (Cummins, 2000; Wolff, 2006).

To be able to implement the policy therefore, QASOS and school teachers need to understand these implications of the policy. Unless understood in the context of language acquisition and learning, most of their implementation would negatively impact on skills and language development; both mother tongues and second languages.

### 3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to establish implementers' understanding of core concepts in the policy. These were rural/urban dichotomies, the mother tongue provision, language predominance, and language of the catchment. The implementers are; primary school grade three teachers, head teachers, and QASOs. Further to that, this study sought to find out if the policy is implemented as possibly intended and if not, why this would be the case? The specific research questions were;

- i. What do implementers know the core concepts in the language-in-education policy in basic education institutions to mean?
- ii. What is the teachers' attitude towards the mother tongue requirement?
- iii. Which language do teachers use to teach content knowledge in lower primary?

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 STUDY SITE

The study was conducted in the Gusii Region of western Kenya, a place inhabited by the Abagusii, a Bantu group of people, whose language is Ekegusii. Their population is about three (3) million. The region's three main towns, which have attracted people from other communities, making them linguistically heterogeneous, are Kisii, Nyamira, and Keroka. The levels of heterogeneity in their Central Business Districts (CBDs), however could be 2.5 on a scale of 5 for Kisii, 1.5 on a scale of 5 for Nyamira, and 1.0 on a scale of 5 for Keroka. Schools in these areas are therefore supposed to use Kiswahili as a language of instruction, and all others should use Ekegusii for instruction up to and including grade three. According to Cammenga (2002), the language is under pressure from the Luo and Kiswahili languages.

### 4.2 RESPONDENTS

There were eighteen (18) respondents in the study: Six (6) QASOs, six (6) head teachers, and six (6) class three teachers. QASOs are based at districts and they are in charge of curriculum implementation in the schools within their territories. The number of schools under a QASO ranges from thirty-five (35) to over fifty (50). QASOs were drawn from six (6) districts, four (4) of which were headquartered out of the main towns/in rural areas and two (2) had their headquarters in the main towns. The majority (four) of the officers were Ekegusii native speakers. Teachers have a crucial role to play as the main agents of language policy implementation (Lo Bianco, 2001). Teachers and head teachers in this study were Ekegusii native speakers from Ekegusii-speaking school catchments, but divided into rural and peri-urban/urban schools. Four (4) teachers and four (4) head teachers taught at rural schools whose catchments were Ekegusii and whose pupils were native Ekegusii speakers. Two (2) other teachers and two (2) other head teachers taught at peri-urban/urban schools whose catchments were Ekegusii-speaking and whose pupils were native Ekegusii speakers as well. The reason for the latter being referred to as peri-urban/urban is that the schools fall within central government administrative units referred to as Township Locations, which include the CBDs of both Nyamira and Kisii Towns. The two schools do not use Ekegusii as a language of instruction (not on account of linguistic heterogeneity but because of geographic location); they instead adopt Kiswahili from grade one.

### 4.3 DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS AND DATA COLLECTION

Face-to-face interviews and document analyses were used to elicit data. The documents studied for analysis were the Gachathi Report (1976), the Koech Report (1999), and Sessional Paper Number 14 of 2012 (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2012). These, and others, are the documents in which the terms in the study are used. Interviews with QASOs were conducted in their offices, and those with head teachers and teachers at their offices and their classrooms respectively. All interviews were audio-recorded.

### 4.4 DATA ANALYSIS

All the recorded interviews were first transcribed and then thematically analyzed. They were read repeatedly for identification of key themes. For documents, content analysis was used to establish the meanings and possible implications of the provisions of the policy. Document analysis was done in conjunction with a study of what literature in language policy states. Notes from both sources of data were then used to present the findings. Research literature conducted in Kenya on the subject of language-in-education policy was also reviewed as background information.

## 5. FINDINGS

### 5.1 INTERPRETATION OF THE POLICY

#### (a) Classification of Schools

It emerged that the various stakeholders understand the meanings of the words urban, peri-urban, and metropolitan in different ways. For instance, the word urban was defined variously as follows;

**Table 1.** *Meaning of Urban Areas.*

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<u>Respondent</u>	<u>Response</u>
QASO 1	This is a place with mixed settlements
QASO 3	These are towns
Head teacher	This is like a metropolitan place
Teacher	These are those areas in town

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*Note.* The four respondents defined urban areas differently.

Each respondent gave their own different definition of an urban area. These differences in understanding were further confirmed when the same respondents were asked to identify urban areas in Gusii, in which case they gave various (and some) inexact responses. Their responses were as follows;

**Table 2.** *Examples of Urban Areas in Gusii.*

<u>Respondent</u>	<u>Response</u>
QASO 1	Kisii, Nyamira, Keroka
QASO 3	Kisii and Nyamira
Head teacher	Kisii Town only
Teacher	All district headquarters in Gusii

*Note.* The respondents gave different examples of an urban area.

This finding would imply that each of the officers would allocate different languages for early primary schooling depending on what they understand. For instance, the Teacher would allocate the use of Kiswahili in schools in/near all district headquarters, while QASO 3 would allocate its use in only Kisii and Nyamira Towns.

## (b) Mother Tongue Provision

Different meanings were given on what the policy means by use of mother tongues up to grade three. QASOs, head teachers, and teachers gave contrasting meanings of this provision. Some said mother tongues should be taught as subjects only, some to be used as languages of instruction only, and a few that mother tongues should be used as both subjects and languages of instruction. Those who said they should be taught as subjects only indicated that mother tongues could not actually be used to teach. This was a response from one of the teachers;

...It is not practical. How can you teach that subject in mother tongue totally? You see like now we teach, ceremonies we teach them, but you must tell them they are ceremonies, *circumcision* (in English). Then you tell them circumcision is when a child is circumcised. Yes you explain to him/her but we use English...

The finding seems to reinforce the possibility that these implementers did not have a common understanding of the policy provision. It suggests that in some schools, Ekegusii is being taught as a subject, in others it is a language of instruction, and in a few others it is both taught as subject and used as a medium of instruction.



### (c) Determination of Language Predominance

It was found that these policy implementers could not agree on how to determine a predominant language. Their responses indicated that they did not understand the principle of language acquisition and learning, which is based on exposure to generous input of the target language. When given a hypothetical class of fifty (50) Ekegusii-speaking pupils and five (5) non-Ekegusii speaking pupils and asked what language should be used according to the policy, the respondents gave varied responses. Two (2) of their responses are;

QASO 1: You will use the Ekegusii language because this is the majority and because children also learn very quickly when they play, it will not take them long before they grasp the Ekegusii language...

QASO 2: In such a case the teacher has a challenge to cater for the five. Because what happens mostly is that the teachers tend to move with majority of the learners. So the five will be left behind, somehow... You can't instruct in Ekegusii of course...

The responses suggest that given an opportunity to decide on a language of the catchment, the respondents would prescribe two different languages of instruction. The former, Ekegusii and the latter, Kiswahili.

### (d) Languages of the Catchment

Just like determination of predominance, the stakeholders defined languages of the catchment variously as indicated in Table 1. There is evidence from their responses that the concept of catchment was not clearly understood.

**Table 3.** *Meaning of Language of the Catchment.*

<u>Respondent</u>	<u>Response</u>
QASO 1:	It is the common language in the classroom, not outside
QASO 2:	The language spoken predominantly around the school, not in school
Head teacher:	It is the language spoken in the local community around the school

*Note.* The responses indicate that each of the respondents understood the concept differently.

Knowledge of the policy among these three groups of people is central to implementation of the policy, especially in Kenya. This is more so for teachers; teachers of long experience are sometimes promoted to the positions of QASO, implying that their understanding would in a way affect policy implementation or otherwise whenever they rise to these more influential positions.

## 5.2 ATTITUDE TO POLICY

The findings indicate that teachers are critical and defiant towards the policy. A possible explanation of this attitude is the mixed understanding of the policy as discussed in Section 4. Teachers cite lack of government commitment to the actualization of the use of mother tongues in teaching/learning. In spite of the ignorance of aspects of the policy as discussed above, teachers seemed to be in agreement that mother tongues should be either taught as subjects, or used as languages of instruction. Teacher defiance is captured in the following emphatic response from one of the head teachers;

...Okay, incidentally again, as much as the government is trying to say that the language of instruction should be the language of the catchment area, that very government has not set exams to meet the needs of that particular area. So it is a contradiction at times... The government can give directives which the government itself is not able to follow down... And number two, not all directives given by the government are practical...For example, the government said or rather gave a directive that children should be taught using a vernacular, but that very government does not request KNEC to set an exam in Ekegusii. So personally I find it a contradiction... They don't actually come to the ground to see actually what is there. Yet these are the very people again who will come up tomorrow and say can you explain why you did not register a good mean (score)? Can you show cause why you cannot be disciplined by having so many failures? ...It is not really practical because even if they say when the government said that, it was not very serious because then the exams even KCPE even KCSE then could be set in Ekegusii the child's own language.

It was indicated that the policy could not be implemented because of supposed government abdication of responsibility. The head teacher says that the government has failed to do two things to indicate its commitment; setting examinations in mother tongues and following up on implementation. In addition the teacher says that it is not practical to implement the policy possibly due to penalties that follow poor performance in national examinations administered in English. Negative attitudes to mother tongue education have been reported in Kenya before (Kembo-Sure, 1994; Khejeri, 2014; & Muthwii, 2002).

## 5.3 IMPLEMENTATION OF POLICY

The findings indicate that teachers do not implement the policy as possibly intended by the drafters. Instead of the use of Ekegusii and Kiswahili to teach in

rural and urban schools respectively, they use English. This is indicated by the respondents as captured in one of the (teachers') responses;

...class three, all subjects except Kiswahili, the children should be taught in English apart from Kiswahili and mother tongue. The children should be taught in English. Yes. English language should be applied in all subjects apart from Kiswahili and mother tongue. Yes.

This response was confirmed by head teachers. According to them too, the language of instruction should be English as indicated below;

Due to the revision of the curriculum, when vernacular was no longer given any emphasis, we also left it out because there was that introduction of Kiswahili and English and the Kikwetu language which also took up the part of Ekegusii, it is a Kiswahili lesson which took up the vernacular lessons. And therefore, that is when the vernacular died in schools.

Teachers use English to teach, which head teachers attribute to change of policy. This is against the policy provision; the policy has not changed since 1976. Subsequent education commissions repeated and enforced it instead. This misunderstanding of the policy provisions seems to be responsible for the attitude that teachers have towards it, as indicated in Section 5.2. This finding is however contrary to findings elsewhere in Africa. In Rwanda, Tanzania, and South Africa, teachers instead ignore the policy by adopting the mother tongues of pupils to facilitate understanding. It has been noted (Maalim, 2014) that language-in-education policies can be interpreted and implemented contrary to the policy document due to people's ideology. Additionally, this finding confirms an observation by some scholars that there are two possible reactions that face language-in-education policies; they could be implemented, or implementers could contest them (Cooper, 1989; Corson, 1999). Another possible cause of this scenario is what Spolsky (2009) refers to as language beliefs, which could be motivating language practices. Kenyan teachers seem to assume that teaching in English could make learners develop English proficiency, a finding common among teachers in Africa (Makalela, 2009).

## 6. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that QASOs, head teachers, and teachers have a different understanding of the various provisions of the language-in-education policy in basic education institutions in Kenya. There is, however, some understanding among the implementers that mother tongues should be used either as subjects or as a languages of instruction. This diverse understanding seems to breed criticism and defiance on the part of implementers, especially in relation to government's ambiguous stance on mother tongue education. Diversity of

understanding of policy among educators could only lead to diverse implementation, non-implementation, and possibly alternative policy implementation based on language education/learning beliefs (Spolsky, 2009). This treatment of Ekegusii in education is mirrored in indigenous Kenyan language usage elsewhere, because all of them exist in a similar sociolinguistic ecosystem.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this study reveal that non-implementation of language-in-education policies in Africa is not necessarily, in all cases, as a result of non-commitment by governments, schools, or parents to use indigenous languages in education. There seems to be disparity between drafters' intentions versus implementer interpretation and actual implementation. Firstly, based on these findings, it is recommended that the government mounts a campaign, which will be meant to teach QASOs about the meaning and implications of the language-in-education policy. QASOs are significant players in the ministry because they stand between government and actual policy implementers. If adequately instructed, they could ensure that teachers teach towards building knowledge in learners in languages they understand well, hence avoiding rote-learning, or possibly pupils losing interest in schooling as reported in the literature. Areas of instruction could include how to classify schools (based on classroom homogeneity or otherwise); theories on learning; and sociolinguistics. These could provide a background upon which their decisions on language could be based. The knowledge could be a background upon which to base their decisions during school inspection trips.

Secondly, the government should build capacity among teachers on how to teach in mother tongues. There is evidence in this study that teachers do not have requisite skills to teach using mother tongues. This could be attributed to their teacher training, which does not have a curriculum for mother tongue instruction. In addition, it seems the subject of language-in-education policy is not discussed in their training. This further indicates that QASOs do not usually discuss the issue in their routine inspection. Their ignorance on such a basic provision should not be permissible in a situation where early education is taken seriously. If teachers could understand the value of mother tongue usage from a learning point of view, it could assist them in making informed decisions around other sociolinguistic considerations, for example in their decisions regarding which languages to use as mediums of instruction.

Thirdly, research has indicated that mother tongues do not enjoy much public goodwill. Mose (2015) has indicated that the public, including scholars in non-language/linguistics/learning disciplines are ignorant of the central position that mother tongues occupy in early child teaching/learning (Wolff, 2015). This calls for a nationwide campaign towards attitude change. This could be achieved

easily now that the country enjoys media broadcasts in mother tongues on more than thirty (30) vernacular radio stations. These stations could be avenues for mother tongue popularization efforts by the government. Only the government has the capacity to achieve this (Kaplan & Baldauf Jr., 1997). Such a sustained campaign could target parents, teachers, and other stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations and church-based organizations, which support education programmes. These efforts could guarantee implementation of the policy as possibly intended by the drafters. Such efforts could also address the defiance that is underpinned by teachers' attitudes and feelings regarding the policy.

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