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# Towards a practical proposal for multilingualism in education in Kenya

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## Abstract

This article proposes multilingualism in education, where indigenous languages are used alongside English as the media of instruction in schools to eventually promote their use in Kenya. It begins by stating Kenya's language policy in education. It then states the responses given by some primary and secondary school teachers who were interviewed on the implementation of the language policy in schools and their attitude towards the possibility of using the mother tongues in teaching some subjects in primary schools and beyond. The differing situation from school to school shows inconsistency in the language policy implementation. Some teachers' views show that indigenous languages should not be forgotten. The article suggests that the indigenous languages should be used more in education and should have an economic value. Finally, plurality is viewed as an African reality and the need to develop a language policy that will strengthen the position of indigenous languages is recognized.

## Introduction

This article first identifies the language policy in education as documented in reports of various commissions. It shows the role that should be played by both international and indigenous languages in education. This information is from the already existing literature on language policy in education in Kenya. As it will be seen, some of the reports used in this study, and which are still relevant, were written and presented before the 21st Century.

The article then explains the extent to which language policy is implemented in schools and the effects of the current language policy on the mother tongue and on education. A practical proposal for multilingualism in education for Kenya is then given. By way of conclusion, the article ends with implications of such a proposal.

## Literature on the language policy in education in Kenya

Kenya's language policy in education is contained in reports of various commissions. After independence, the Ominde Commission (1964) recommended the use of English as the medium of instruction right from class 1 (grade 1). The mother tongue was not given any place. Next was the Gachathi Report (1976), which recommended the use of the mother tongue from class 1 to class 3 (grades 1–3). More support for the use of the mother tongue appeared in the Koech Report (1999).

That Kiswahili should be taught as a compulsory subject was a recommendation of the Ominde Commission (1964). The Commission also recommended the establishment of the Department of Kiswahili at the University of Nairobi and that Kiswahili teachers should be trained during school holidays. It is noted that Kiswahili was not an examinable subject. Time allocated or assigned for teaching Kiswahili was used for teaching other subjects because Kiswahili was not examinable (Mbaka, Nancy 2010: *Language policy implementation and experiences in selected primary schools in Chuka Division - Meru South District*, Unpublished). She also notes that the remaining two recommendations (the establishment of the Department of Kiswahili at the University of Nairobi and the training of Kiswahili teachers during school holidays) were not put into practice.

It was the Gachathi Report (1976) that recommended the introduction of Kiswahili as an examinable subject. Once again Kiswahili was to be taught as a compulsory subject from class three onwards. However, the implementation was actualised in the 8-4-4 system of education, which was recommended in the Mackay Report (1984). This is the system of education in Kenya where primary school education takes 8 years. This is the same as grades 1 to 8. Secondary school education then takes 4 years, which is equivalent to grades 9 to 12, and lastly, university education takes at least 4 years. There are degree courses, such as medicine and engineering, which take more than 4 years, but generally the majority of the degree courses require 4 years. The education system in Kenya is therefore named according to the number of years for recommended primary school, secondary school and university education. There are national examinations to be done by the candidates after the first 8 years and another set of exams after the next 4 years, after which candidates are awarded certificates known as Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), respectively. In the universities, the semester system is used. Today Kiswahili is a compulsory and examinable subject in both primary and secondary schools in Kenya.

The Ominde Commission (1964) recommended the use of English right from class 1. Since then, English has remained the recommended medium of instruction in Kenya especially from standard 4 onwards. The Koech Report (1999) did not add anything new to the language policy (Mbaka, Nancy 2010: *Language policy implementation and experiences in selected primary schools in Chuka Division - Meru South District*, Unpublished), but we have already acknowledged that it gave more support for the use of the mother tongues that was already proposed in the Gachathi Report (1976).

It is worth noting that in secondary schools, English is still an examinable subject and the sole medium of instruction. Apart from English and Kiswahili, some schools offer French and/or German. The latter two foreign languages are not compulsory and are not in the reports on language policy in education in Kenya. English remains the sole medium of instruction in higher institutions of learning. In higher institutions of learning, those who wish to take Kiswahili as a subject or to train to be Kiswahili teachers are taught the subject matter in Kiswahili. When they are undertaking the professional courses recommended for teachers (e.g. Educational Administration and Planning, and Curriculum Development), English is the medium of instruction. The indigenous languages in Kenya do not feature as languages of instruction anywhere in secondary school education. Only Kiswahili features, but as a subject.

The foregoing reports show that in the education policy in Kenya, English enjoys a supreme position as the sole language of instruction from class 4 (grade 4) to the university in the whole country and as the only language of instruction in most urban schools; followed by Kiswahili as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools, and as a medium of instruction from classes 1 to 3 in some urban areas; and then the mother tongue as a medium of instruction from class 1 to 3 in rural schools. All the indigenous languages, except Kiswahili, seem to operate at the same level as far as language policy in education is concerned. In other words indigenous languages are not supposed to be used, either as a medium of instruction or as a subject, beyond class 3. Each indigenous language should enjoy the status of being the language of instruction in the first three years of primary school education, wherever it is regarded as the language of the catchment area. The language of the catchment area refers to the mother tongue of the community. It is the mother tongue used in a particular region that should be used in the primary schools (classes 1–3) of that region. In reality, in some rural areas mother tongue is not taught as a subject (in three lessons) and is not used as the medium of instruction throughout from classes 1–3. That is why it is asserted in this article that in some areas, the indigenous languages enjoy the status of languages of instruction on paper only.

### **A brief methodology**

Eighteen teachers were interviewed on the implementation of the language policy in the schools where they teach or used to teach. The sample included both primary and secondary school teachers who were at the University of Nairobi undertaking a Master of Arts (MA) degree in linguistics. The interviews therefore took place at the University of Nairobi. The sample could therefore be termed as a convenient sample because it was composed of ‘... those persons available for the study’ (Best and Kahn, 2006, p. 18) at the University of Nairobi. Only those who availed themselves for the study were interviewed because they were willing to participate. The sample was considered to be sufficient because it consisted of MA students who already had the experience of teaching in different regions of Kenya. All these teachers also went through the system of education in Kenya. I guaranteed the participants anonymity.

They were asked to respond to several questions, aimed at assessing the extent to which language policy described in Literature on the language policy in education in Kenya above is implemented in both primary and secondary schools and the attitude of the teachers towards the possibility of using the mother tongues in teaching some of the subjects in primary school and beyond. This would mean replacing English in some subjects with some of the mother tongues. They were generally asked to state the language used as a medium of instruction in both primary and secondary schools they have taught in or are teaching in, the language used as a means of communication outside the classroom, how mother tongue is used in rural schools and their attitude towards the use of the mother tongues as a medium of instruction and as a subject beyond class 3.

Some of the teachers had the experience of teaching in both primary and secondary schools. Most of them had taught in more than one school. The responses were subjected to a qualitative analysis as seen in the discussions below.

**Table 1 Language, age and gender of the participants**

Participants (teachers)	Mother tongue	Other languages	Age (Years)	Gender
T 1	Dholuo	Eng/Kisw	28	F
T 2	Dholuo	Eng/Kisw/Lumarachi	40	F
T 3	Dholuo	Eng/Kisw	27	M
T 4	Dholuo	Eng/Kisw	36	M
T 5	Dholuo	Eng/Kisw	32	M
T 6	Ekegusii	Eng/Kisw/Dholuo	35	M
T 7	Ekegusii	Eng/Kisw/Igikuria	45	F
T 8	Ekegusii	Eng/Kisw/Dholuo	53	M
T 9	Kimeru	Eng/Kisw	44	F
T 10	Kiambu	Eng/Kisw/Gikuyu	38	F
T 11	Kiambu	Eng/Kisw/Gikuyu	40	F
T 12	Kalenjin (Kips)	Eng/Kisw	35	M
T 13	Kalenjin (Kips)	Eng/Kisw/French	36	F
T 14	Kikamba	Eng/Kisw	34	F
T 15	Gikuyu	Eng/Kisw	35	F
T 16	Gikuyu	Eng/Kisw	45	M
T 17	Gikuyu	Eng/Kisw	48	F
T 18	Gikuyu	Eng/Kisw/Lub/Ekeg	45	M

Key: Kisw, Kiswahili; Eng, English; Kips, Kipsigis; Lub, Lubukusu; Ekeg, Ekegusii; F, Female; M, Male.

The table above shows the language, age and gender of the participants (teachers) used in the research (Table 1). All the teachers interviewed speak English and Kiswahili. Their mother tongues were varied, namely Dholuo, Ekegusii, Kimeru, Kiambu, Kalenjin (Kipsigis dialect), Kikamba and Gikuyu. As the table shows, some of the teachers speak other languages apart from their mother tongue, English and Kiswahili. The teachers interviewed were aged between 27 and 53 years. Eight were male while ten were female. Since the teachers were promised anonymity, they are named in the table using numbers. Therefore, ‘T1’ means Teacher number 1, while ‘T18’ means Teacher number 18. The key below the table shows the complete names of the languages spoken by the participants and their gender.

**Language policy implementation in school**

In this section, I look at both primary and secondary schools.

**Primary schools**

From the interviewed teachers (see A brief methodology), it emerges that the situation differs from school to school. In some primary schools in the rural areas occupied by the speakers of Ekegusii, the mother tongue is used as expected in class 1–3 by some teachers. Some use Kiswahili as well. Some teachers use both English and Kiswahili in an attempt to show the students that the two are important and that they therefore need them.

The issue of the mother tongue use is left at the teacher’s discretion. Some teachers teach mathematics in their mother tongue and this continues to the upper classes.

Some teachers feel that some concepts in certain subjects can be explained better in the mother tongue. From a methodological point of view, it is noted that such a pragmatic approach to teaching is not necessarily bad.

Some of the teachers do not use English effectively because of their own inadequacies in the language. They therefore are not deliberately using mother tongue as a matter of language policy, but for their own special reasons such as their inability to communicate effectively in English. Consequently, they fall back to their mother tongue. Language policy is therefore not given prominence.

In the urban areas, the prevailing situation is almost uniform. The mother tongue is not used as a medium of instruction in any of the schools in the urban areas. In urban schools, for example in an urban school in Nakuru, only English is used as the medium of instruction, while Kiswahili is taught as a subject. However, in some of these urban schools, the teacher may use both English and Kiswahili in lower primary classes (class 1–3). In some schools, especially private schools, children converse in English most of the time. Sometimes the schools set aside one day in a week for conversing or speaking in Kiswahili to improve the spoken form of their Kiswahili. In these schools, English is used as a medium of instruction, while Kiswahili is only taught as a subject. They therefore adhere to the expected language policy.

In one of the schools, teaching takes place in English as expected but Kiswahili is used to emphasize or clarify a point. This is because of the perception that the learners will understand a concept in Kiswahili better than in English.

During staff meetings in most schools, the issue of language policy does not come up. When a teacher was asked if he was aware of the language policy in education in Kenya, he responded by stating that anyone who has undergone training as a teacher is aware of the reports of various commissions. This could be the reason why it is not discussed in staff meetings.

In some schools in the rural areas, teachers use the mother tongue to address each other if they come from the same speech community. Those who do not come from the speech community of the location of the school use Kiswahili and English.

### **Secondary schools**

In some schools in the rural areas, where it is possible that all the students come from one locality, both trained and untrained teachers use the mother tongue to explain concepts that they find difficult. The reason given for the use of the mother tongue relates to the students and the teachers themselves. For students, the reason is linked to their entry behaviour from primary schools: that their level of competence in English language is not up to the expected standard. Some teachers use the mother tongue because they lack a commendable command of English.

The situation is different in some of the big rural secondary schools, which admit students from different speech communities in Kenya. Kiswahili is used in teaching Kiswahili lessons only. English is used in teaching all the other subjects. The use of mother tongue is discouraged and only a small number of students use it in the absence of teachers. In most national schools, both students and teachers prefer using English at all times.

In others, the school administration was said to be aware of the language policy, since the head teacher and the deputy head teacher encouraged the use of English and Kiswahili only. Some days are set aside for speaking English and others for speaking Kiswahili. Language policy is observed or implemented since students are discouraged from using their mother tongue in school. Failure to use either English or Kiswahili is punishable by the use of negative reinforcement. The students are given either manual work to do as a form of punishment or a disk to carry around. The manual work is done when the other students are in class or after school when the other students are playing different games or are on their way home.

One teacher suggested that there should be clear-cut rules and policies pertaining to language use in institutions of learning. This seems to me to stem from the fact that neither the education inspectorate nor the administrators in some schools ensure that language policy is adhered to. The teachers are, to an extent, allowed to do what they want. This implies that the department of quality assurance needs to enforce the set guidelines to ensure full implementation of the policy.

### **Feelings towards the mother tongue as a medium of instruction**

It emerged from the interviews with teachers that all the languages, indigenous ones included, should be given prominence. When asked to state whether some of the subjects should be taught in the mother tongue, the response was that if it would aid in promoting the indigenous or local languages then the idea was very acceptable.

Some teachers did not support the idea of teaching a subject like social studies in the mother tongue. The reason given was that it would be difficult to implement in urban schools due to the cosmopolitan nature of such schools. It emerged that mother tongue classes should be introduced instead. One teacher said that teaching in the mother tongue was only possible in the rural areas and stated that parents have the responsibility of teaching their mother tongue to their children.

One teacher did not support the use of the mother tongue because she claimed that there would be lack of uniformity. She noted that though teaching in the mother tongue would give children from the same community a better understanding of the subject, the teaching would not be uniform throughout. This meant that there were fears that the subject matter would not be passed to the students in the same way in the different mother tongues. She claimed that it would be better to emphasize points in the mother tongue than to use it as a medium of instruction. This also implied that first of all a language known to the students across the country should be used in teaching, then where necessary the mother tongue could be used for clarification and emphasis. This then was a more acceptable approach for this teacher.

Some teachers stated that the introduction of the mother tongue would be advantageous to the extent that it would give students, who did not use the mother tongue, the opportunity to use it in school, but that at the same time it would make those who were fond of using the mother tongue to ignore English. Such students, they said, would not bother to learn English well. These teachers then did not seem to support any one side entirely.

### Emerging issues

From the foregoing discussions, a number of issues pertaining to language policy have emerged. Some of these include the value of the different languages or the national beliefs in the importance of Kiswahili and English, and the research evidence which shows that the use of the mother tongues as a medium of instruction in early childhood improves learning. All these are discussed in this section. They provide a springboard for the proposals made in A practical proposal of multilingualism in education below.

The main strength of the language policy in education in Kenya, as already stated, is seen in the introduction of Kiswahili as a compulsory and examinable subject both in primary and secondary schools. With the elevation of Kiswahili to the status of a compulsory subject, as already stated, students from all over the country have a chance to know the language they can identify with as Kenyans. It is my belief that Kiswahili is more widely spoken now than when it was not a compulsory subject in schools. It is also my belief that the population of people speaking Standard Kiswahili is growing because students and teachers in schools take Kiswahili seriously because it is examinable and, just as English; it is taken into consideration when students are being selected for various courses in the universities in Kenya. More and more people are able to speak it well even though some comedians, actors and actresses are using non-standard forms in their oral performance and people seem to enjoy this creative use of language.

As observed in Oduor (2010), the benefits of English as a language of international trade, diplomacy and internet communication are really significant gains for those who can speak English well, not to mention the education and training opportunities in the English speaking world. Most of the internet technology is in English. English is used as a second language in Kenya in the day-to-day government business activities.

Kembo-Sure and Ogechi (2006) propose bilingualism in education. Their proposal would be referred to as additive or elite bilingualism, especially the proposal that they refer to as their first scenario because ‘... the child’s native language is intact and develops ...’ (Romaine 1989) as a result of being used in education in the early grades as will be seen in this paragraph. Crystal (2003) states that:

in ... additive or elite bilingualism, a majority group learns a second language without this being a threat to its first language (e.g. English speaking Canadians learning French) ...’ p. 51.

It is this kind of bilingualism that is intended in their proposal for children speaking the mother tongues in Kenya. In their alternative language policy, which they propose for Kenya, there are two scenarios. In the first scenario, the mother tongues are used exclusively up to grade 4. From grade 5 to 8, both English and the mother tongues are used concurrently so that English is introduced as a medium of instruction gradually as the mother tongues are also dropped gradually. English is then used in all subjects from grade 9 onwards. They note that:

In terms of status planning, there will be functional expansion for Kiswahili and other local languages. The languages will be examined and their grades will contribute towards the pupil’s admission requirements to the next grade. This will



give the languages more status and they will be more attractive to people who will now yearn to learn them. (Kembo-Sure and Ogechi, 2006, p. 48).

English, Kiswahili and the other mother tongues are taught as subjects. In the second scenario, the mother tongues, as usual are used as a medium of instruction up to grade 3 and thus 'Kiswahili could be the medium of instruction in peri- and most urban schools' ((Kembo-Sure and Ogechi, 2006, p. 51). In addition, English and Kiswahili are taught as subjects. They then state that

... from Grade Four up to Grade Eight, Kiswahili takes over as the language of teaching and writing examination except for English language and local languages exams. English takes over as a medium of instruction in high school. (Kembo-Sure and Ogechi, 2006, p. 51).

In their second scenario, I assume that by the time the children join grade 1, they already speak Kiswahili in addition to their mother tongue.

In this article, I suggest multilingualism in education, where in addition to Kiswahili and English, the mother tongue is also taught as a subject and is used as a medium of instruction. This means that the three languages will be taught and used as a medium of instruction in various subjects. It is noted here that the term *mother tongue* represents a number of indigenous languages spoken in Kenya. The motivation for the inclusion of the mother tongues in the education system in Kenya is given in some of the paragraphs below.

The suggestions made here towards a practical multilingual language policy in education are to an extent inspired by the current approaches to language planning, which are

... largely influenced by the recent political and social movements such as globalization, multi/interculturalism, pluralism, human rights and democratization (Kembo-Sure and Ogechi, 2006, p. 42).

Kembo-Sure and Ogechi (2006) note that some of these issues are not completely new. They need to be given attention in order to improve life for every Kenyan.

They also note that the '... ideology of pluralism gives room for the campaign to have all languages or varieties recognized and protected by the law of the land' (Kembo-Sure and Ogechi 2006, p.42). It is also noted that there are advantages of using the home language or the child's mother tongue at the beginning of their education and then introducing the other languages later on or at an appropriate age (Kembo-Sure and Ogechi, 2006). Yigezu (2006) quotes the Educational and Training Policy of Ethiopia which provides the strategy for vernacular education as follows: 'Cognizant of the pedagogical advantage of the child learning in mother tongue and the rights of nationalities to promote the use of their languages, primary education will be given in nationality languages' (p. 49). Ethiopia therefore recognizes the advantage or importance of using the mother tongue from the onset of primary education. Like these researchers, the author recognizes the importance of educating a child using the mother tongue and it is for this reason that she makes the proposals in A practical proposal of multilingualism in education.



As far as human rights are concerned the ‘... need for constitutional and/or legal protection of all languages and guaranteeing individuals the right to choose the language in which to receive education ...’ is emphasized (Kembo-Sure and Ogechi, 2006, p. 43). In line with this, the Constitution of Kenya (2010), Part 2 section 44 states that:

- i. Every person has the right to use the language, and to participate in the cultural life, of the person’s choice.
- ii. A person belonging to a cultural or linguistic community has the right, with other members of that community-
  - a) to enjoy the person’s culture and use the person’s language: or
  - b) to form, join and maintain cultural and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society (the Constitution of Kenya, 2010, p. 52).

The Constitution of Kenya therefore embraces the importance and therefore dignity of each language in Kenya. This is in a way similar to the current (from 1991 to date) language policy in Ethiopia, which is spelt out in their constitution. Yigezu (2006) quotes the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution, Article 5, which states that: ‘All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition’ (p. 48). It is noted in this article that Ethiopia had, long before Kenya, recognized the equality and importance of all languages.

Much has been said about ecology but there is need to note that:

Planning language for a country must recognize the link between children’s linguistic repertoire and their response to their physical and cultural environment. Since the school is the most powerful socialization agent today, education must promote the home languages ... so that folk knowledge and wisdom can be acquired effectively (Kembo-Sure and Ogechi, 2006, p. 43).

The authors further state that this policy will encourage the need to create a balance between exploitation and preservation of our natural resources. Kembo-Sure and Ogechi (2006) seem to support the view that certain subjects are best conveyed or taught to the learners in their mother tongues. This is yet another issue which this article supports and recommends for the system of education in Kenya.

The reason for the recommendation of an additional four years is motivated by a research carried out by Heugh (2009). Her research showed that in Ethiopia:

... students with eight years MTE [Mother Tongue education] have higher scores across the curriculum, especially in mathematics and science, than students with six, four or zero years of MTE. Students who perform best in English are those with six years of MTE followed by English medium, but overall, students with eight years of MTE achieve best across the entire curriculum (p. 173).

She notes that her research findings confirm ‘... the findings and analysis of other African studies on language and education’ (Heugh, 2009, p. 173). Some of these studies include: Bamgbose (2000), Heugh (1999), Ramirez et al. (1991) and Thomas and

Collier (2002). In this article, it is hoped that continuing the use of the mother tongue for a year after class will ensure that learners not only get high scores across the curriculum, but also perform well in English. This means that increased exposure to English will begin after class 7 and not after class 8 as seen in some schools in Ethiopia. Heugh (2009) states that the probable logical explanation for the better performance in English by those who switch from six years of MTE to English than by those who continue with MTE for eight years is increased exposure to English.

According to Kamwangamalu (2009), for ‘... African languages to become appealing in the linguistic market place, even to their own speakers; they must be assigned an economic value’ (p. 139). He states that this economic value can be attained by meeting three conditions as follows.

the indigenous official languages must ‘... be vested with some of the privileges, prestige, power and material gains that have for so long been associated only with ex-colonial languages (Kamwangamalu, 1997, p. 249, cited by Kamwangamalu, 2009, p. 139).

- i. ‘... in order to promote functional mass literacy and thus empower the masses with the skills they need to access resources, African languages should be used gradually throughout the entire education system’ (Kamwangamalu, 2009, p. 139).
- ii. ‘... a certified (i.e. school-acquired) knowledge of the indigenous African languages should become one of the criteria for access to employment, much as is currently the case for ex-colonial languages in certain areas of the African continent’ (Kamwangamalu, 2009, p. 139).
- iii. It is with regard to (i), (ii) and (iii) that the article proposes the use of the mother tongues right up to secondary schools and in some degree courses in the university. It is felt that if these three conditions are applied to the situation in Kenya, the indigenous languages will have an economic value.

Kamwangamalu (2009, p.239) explains that for the three conditions to be met the use of the ex-colonial languages must be curtailed, while simultaneously encouraging the creation of conditions for the indigenous languages to ‘... play a meaningful role, at least in the linguistic marketplace’. Unlike Kamwangamalu (2009), this article does not propose a complete curtailing of the ex-colonial language in Kenya because it is believed that Kenyans should go for internationally competitive jobs, some of which can only be obtained if one has good knowledge of the international languages such as English. Ignoring some of these international languages completely could to an extent imply reducing the spirit of multilingualism.

Some of the emerging issues are also viewed as challenges. One of the major challenges is the language policy in education itself. In Kenya the language policy in education does not seem to embrace the indigenous languages to a large extent. None of the indigenous languages apart from Kiswahili is learnt as a subject up to the university. This gives the feeling that most of our languages, if not all, are endangered. In fact, some languages are more endangered than others, for example El molo, Rendille and Olusuba. The Rendille are abandoning their language for Samburu (Ngure, Kenneth Kamuri 2012: *From Rendille to Samburu: A Language Shift Involving Two Mutually*

Unintelligible Languages of Northern Kenya, Unpublished). The El Molo are also abandoning their language for Samburu. The Abasuba had abandoned their language for Dholuo. However, the Abasuba people are currently involved in the efforts to revitalize their language.

The Constitution of Kenya (2010) does not ensure that there is the promotion of African languages in education. To this extent I agree with Kamwangamalu (2009, p. 134), who cites Prah (1995) in stating that:

... most African states have constitutionally created space for African languages, but have hardly attempted to alter what was handed down through the colonial experience (p. 67).

The attitude of the parents, teachers and the students in Kenya is another challenge. Most people want their children to learn English. In Kenya, parents who have the chance of teaching their children mother tongue prefer to introduce English rather than the mother tongue to them. Some parents prefer to use both Kiswahili and English. They view their mother tongues as being inferior to English. This happens even in areas like Kisumu, where we expect Dholuo to be the language of the catchment area. This makes it difficult for teachers who are willing to struggle to use Dholuo in teaching such children from classes 1–3.

To an extent, teachers are also to blame as reflected by Mbaka, Nancy 2010: Language policy implementation and experiences in selected primary schools in Chuka Division - Meru South District, Unpublished. Her study shows that when teachers are given the opportunity to use mother tongue from class 1 to 3, they code switch and code mix. In rural areas, the languages involved in code mixing are English and the mother tongue or Kiswahili and the mother tongue. In most urban areas, the use of indigenous languages in education, apart from Kiswahili, is lacking totally.

Most of the young people living with their parents in urban areas do not know their mother tongue. They do not necessarily have a negative attitude towards their mother tongue but they have simply grown up using Kiswahili or English and when they go to school, they are taught both English and Kiswahili, not the mother tongue. This is an issue that is of great concern in many urban areas as it threatens the survival of the indigenous languages. In fact Kembo and Ogechi (2006: 48) recognize this when they state that in '... places like the Coast Province and urban centres, Kiswahili will be [the] mother tongue and thus medium of instruction'. So, they admit that Kiswahili is replacing the mother tongues in the urban areas.

We note that some schools use both trained and untrained teachers. The untrained teachers may not be aware of the language policy in education in Kenya.

Most of the teachers who are supposed to teach are not literate in the mother tongues. In Kenya at present, Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL) programmes have tried to encourage literacy in indigenous languages. The education policy as it is at present has not contributed towards ensuring that teachers are at least literate in the mother tongue of the areas they teach in. Teachers have not undergone any formal training to empower them in the use of the local languages in teaching. We therefore do not expect them to have the necessary skills to teach or use the mother tongue as a medium of instruction. Teachers do not have the competence to teach in the mother tongue because they are trained in English.

Kenya has a limited number of teaching and learning materials written in the mother tongue. This poses a great challenge because those willing to teach in mother tongue may not get the necessary materials they require.

It emerges that what is stated about the mother tongue in the language policy is not implemented as it should. Following the specification in the language policy, the Ministry of Education Syllabus (2002) indicates that in classes 1–3, English and Kiswahili should be given 5 lessons each, while the mother tongue is given 3 lessons per week. As already indicated in this section, a mixture of the mother tongue and English or Kiswahili is used as a medium of communication in lower primary school in rural schools (Mbaka, Nancy 2010: Language policy implementation and experiences in selected primary schools in Chuka Division - Meru South District, Unpublished. In urban schools a mixture of English and Kiswahili is used. It is therefore doubtful if the mother tongue is taught as a subject in lower primary.

The mother tongues in Kenya at the moment are not linked with the economy. This reduces their chances of survival in this age of globalization. Kamwangamalu (2009) argues that:

... for indigenous African languages to survive, especially in the era of globalization, they must be given a share of the market value that ex-colonial languages have in the African linguistic market place. In other words, each African country must create a link between African languages and the economy if the languages are to become, at least for their speakers, an instrument for upward social mobility (p. 137).

### **A practical proposal of multilingualism in education**

English or Kiswahili should be used as the medium of instruction in kindergarten or nursery and classes 1–7 in urban areas. The main reason for this proposal is that most, if not all of the urban areas in Kenya are cosmopolitan. The mother tongue should be used for the same purpose in kindergarten or nursery and classes 1–7 in rural areas. It might be argued that such a proposal could lead to balkanization of the country, but such an approach would be more practical and meaningful considering Kenya's socio-linguistic situation. As already stated earlier, the current language policy in education in Kenya states that the mother tongues should be used from classes 1–3. Therefore, this article recommends an additional four years.

English, Kiswahili and the mother tongue should be the languages of instruction from Class Eight up to Form Four as per Kenya's education system. English, Kiswahili and the mother tongue should also be taught as subjects from kindergarten to Form Four. English should remain the medium of instruction for higher education. Each subject should be examined in the language in which it is taught. All subjects should be examinable.

Students in urban areas should learn at least one indigenous language apart from Kiswahili for cultural relations. The school should offer some of the indigenous languages to the students in urban areas to choose from. Just as it is at the moment, schools which are able to offer foreign languages, such as French and German, should do so for international relations. English and Kiswahili should continue to serve as languages of countrywide communication. The proposed tasks for each language in class 8

in primary schools, where English and Kiswahili take over as media of instruction in some subjects, should be as follows:

**English:** Mathematics, English, Science

**Kiswahili:** Kiswahili, Social Studies.

**Mother tongue:** Mother tongue, Christian Religious Education (C.R.E.) and Islamic Religious Education (I.R.E.)

Some children already consider Kiswahili to be their mother tongue in urban areas. Social Studies as a teaching subject has a number of topics that focus on the environment and if it were taught through an indigenous language, a balance between exploitation and preservation of our natural resources (as already stated above) would be achieved now and in the future.

The reason for the choice of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction for C.R.E. is that Bibles written in mother tongue already exist. A lot of effort has already been made by BTL and similar organizations and we need to take advantage of this. In addition to this, in most rural areas church service is conducted in the mother tongue.

For the purpose of continuity in secondary schools, the task allocation for each language should be as follows:

**English:** Mathematics, English, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Business Studies,

**Kiswahili:** Kiswahili, Geography, History, Agriculture, Music, Art and craft,

**Mother tongue:** Home Science, C.R.E. and I.R.E.

For Business Studies, though English has been proposed as the medium of instruction, schools could be given the leeway to decide on which language to use as a medium of instruction. The reason for this is that in the job market, we have business ranging from large scale business involving international trade to small scale business within the local community where a specific mother tongue is spoken.

In the university, all courses could be taught in English so that candidates are able to compete for jobs in any part of the world, but those preparing to teach the mother tongues must take courses, including methodology courses, in the specific mother tongues they want to teach. Therefore, like Watson and Pienaar (2007), cited in Nyika (2009), the article encourages training teachers admitted to the university to use mother tongue in their teaching career. To change ‘... the diminishing status of African languages as linguistic capital...’, they ‘... call for the re-opening and reinvigorating of African languages departments at universities, and for these institutions to incentivise proactively the training of language professionals such as teachers, translators, writers and linguists, in order to create jobs across various sectors’ (Nyika, 2009, p. 256).

We should ensure that teachers are prepared to implement the use of indigenous languages in education by training them to teach the mother tongue and in the mother tongue. This is the best step that any country can take towards policy implementation because teachers teach what the system has prepared them to teach. Teachers must also be encouraged to provide a lot of exercises to the students. According to Heugh (2009), “School exercise books examined during the Ethiopian study revealed regular writing tasks undertaken on a daily basis, and consistent evidence of daily homework including reading and writing” (p. 174).

Initially, some of these mother tongues should be taught up to the university. Later on all the Kenyan mother tongues should be included because it may not be possible to start such a project with all the mother tongues at once. Teaching the mother tongues up to the university is necessary because they are needed by the teachers who will eventually teach them to students in schools. If this is done, it will give the Kenyan mother tongues an economic value. In addition, if knowledge of the mother tongue of a specific area is a condition for getting a job in that area, then it would be necessary to teach the Kenyan mother tongues at the university as well. This may also help to encourage and ensure that there is adequate research going on in these languages. A lot of research has to be done on these languages. The mother tongues in Kenya, just as any other mother tongue, are a rich research area for linguists and those in related disciplines. In Kenya there are departments such as the Department of Linguistics and Languages at the University of Nairobi. Such departments should ensure that they teach some of the indigenous languages at the universities to ensure that they remain alive. Kenya needs to promote and strengthen research in Kenya's indigenous languages. In Addis Ababa University, there is a section that mainly deals with research on Ethiopian languages. At the moment they are also trying to train students to engage in language documentation thus encouraging language maintenance and avoiding extinction. We need to encourage more rigorous research on Kenyan languages and encourage mass literacy programmes.

Using English as a medium of instruction does not mean ignoring the indigenous languages, because efforts could be made to train translators to translate books written in English, into indigenous languages and vice versa. The translation can be done with the help of the professionals in the respective areas. These professionals should then use their mother tongues to facilitate work and to transmit the knowledge they have gained to others at their places of work. Professional indigenous language tests should be administered before one is allowed to work in a particular region where that language is spoken. This will ensure that people do not ignore their mother tongues even when the medium of instruction is English.

One of the major proposals concerns teacher training. Early Childhood Education colleges should prepare teacher trainees to teach English, Kiswahili and the mother tongues. Here we recommend that since teachers are expected to teach any subject in primary school, they should be prepared to teach English, Kiswahili and their mother tongue. This will give them a chance to work in urban schools apart from schools where their mother tongue is based. The mother tongue, just as English, Kiswahili, German, French and any other language currently taught in the 8-4-4 system of education, should be offered to those training to be secondary school teachers (Bachelor of Education students) who may opt to teach the mother tongue as subjects in secondary schools. This may not be attractive initially when opportunities to advance as a teacher of mother tongue may not seem apparent.

## **Conclusion**

Generally, this article has attempted to propose how multilingualism can be incorporated in education in Kenya. It has also spelt out the language policy in education in Kenya and shown that what is stated about the mother tongue in the language policy in



Kenya is not implemented as it should. It proposes that if the mother tongues are taught as examinable subjects and used as media of instruction in some subjects, just as English and Kiswahili, they will be taken as useful academic subjects by all and this may ensure that they survive. Their position may further be strengthened if they are taken into consideration during the selection for various courses into the universities, just as English and Kiswahili.

There are also several issues that the findings of the study have demonstrated. First, teachers need to be posted to places where they can use their mother tongue easily in teaching, when called upon to do so by the school or under any other circumstances. Secondly, teachers also need to be trained to teach indigenous languages and in the indigenous languages. Thirdly, it is seen that the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction is good. Fourthly, it is noted that using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction would be easier to implement in rural areas than in urban areas. Fifthly, the issue of how to use different languages in the classroom is raised. In other words, how should the languages interact in teaching? Lastly, there are two interrelated issues: the issue of the indigenous languages being accessible in school for those who failed to learn them at home and the concern that the standards of performance in English will go down further because some students will ignore the subject.

As I conclude this article, there are questions here of how to handle aspirations for the mother tongues in a manner that takes the challenges of the Kenyan context into account. Language policy in education is a complex issue and should be handled with caution from one country to another. More proposals, like the ones made above, need to be made and more research needs to be done in order to come up with a compromise on what language policy in education would be the best for Kenya. Though one would argue that Kiswahili in Kenya can play the role that is proposed for the other indigenous languages in this article, it is important to remember that if Kiswahili is allowed to dominate completely, it may threaten the survival of other indigenous languages. Kiswahili already has the role of a language of wider communication.

Okombo (2001) concluded his inaugural lecture on language policy in Africa by stating that ‘... plurality is the African reality’ (p. 35). Kamwangamalu (2009) expresses his sentiments about indigenous African languages by stating that:

Like former colonial languages, African languages must become languages of access to higher education, resources and employment, political participation, economic opportunity and upward social mobility. Unless language policies in Africa are revised and geared towards these targets, efforts to promote the indigenous languages will be doomed to fail, despite what the constitutions of African countries say about the status of these languages (p. 141).

Language policies that are desirable should take these facts into consideration. There is need to develop a language policy that will strengthen the position of our indigenous languages in Kenya, but at the same time enable Kenyans to use international languages such as English effectively. The government must be willing to support the endeavor in all ways.

#### **Competing interests**

The author declares that she has no competing interests.



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