

**Language in Education and the role of Applied Linguistics  
in Kenya**

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**Abstract**

Language in education has remained a major concern in most African countries, especially those that were formerly colonized by European countries. Several problems that Africa and Kenya in particular, faces are closely tied to the language of education. What is the nature of these problems and whose responsibility is it to solve them? What is the role of an applied linguist in this linguistically complicated situation in Kenya? The definition of applied linguistics or who an applied linguist is eludes many. This paper does not propose to provide a definition either. Using the varied definitions that exist in literature, a working definition is developed and based on that definition; the paper shows that Kenya has several language issues that call for the services of applied linguists. While the issues range from the national language policies, language in education, multilingualism, second language teaching to language acquisition, the paper narrows the focus to four language-based problems, all of which are closely tied to the language of education. Although no solutions are suggested to these problems, a list of questions is formulated for the applied linguist to research on.

**Key Words: Language planning, language in education, language policies.**

## **Introduction**

The term applied linguistics as used in the title of this paper raises a question that must be clarified first. What is applied linguistics? Who are applied linguists? What do they do? How is their work different from those of theoretical linguists?

Many scholars have explored the issue of who applied linguists are, but still it is never that clear whether applied linguistics is a field or a discipline. Some scholars view applied linguistics as a transdiscipline, a multidiscipline, an interdiscipline, a mediator or simply just an ongoing project (See Brumfit, 1997; Evensen, 1997; Sridhar, 1993; Widdowson, 2000).

### *Defining applied linguistics: The varied views*

Sridhar 1993 discusses two views of applied linguistics: the narrow and the broad view. The narrow view, as he sees it, is “equated with language teaching – mainly second or foreign but also first language teaching” (p. 5). At its inception, applied linguistics was viewed simply as language teaching. At this point, it may even have been reasonable to call foreign language teachers applied linguists. Sridhar says in that same article that “Language teaching has been claimed to be the showpiece of applications of linguistics” (p. 6).

Sridhar’s second view, the broad view, refers to a wide range of areas outside of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. He calls this broad view “extended linguistics” instead of applied linguistics, and according to him, “much of what is

understood by applied linguistics in the broad sense turns out to be not applications of linguistics but simply an extension of linguistics” (p. 8).

What is applied in applied linguistics? The broad view discussed above extends beyond applying linguistic theories in language teaching. This author proposes that applied linguistics maybe seen as extended linguistics in the sense that theories developed in linguistics are used to solve language related problems in a number of other areas, but at the same time, he argues that linguistic theory has not really been used to address real life language problems.

Although Sridhar complicates the definition of applied linguistics, I see his two views as the development process of applied linguistics. While applied linguistics may have initially focused more on language teaching, the focus has gradually changed and as Catford (1998) argues, applied linguistics has moved from its early focus on language teaching to inclusion of several other aspects such as translation, language planning and research in language policies. Despite this leap into addressing other areas besides language teaching, literature seems to support the fact that most people view applied linguistics as either focusing entirely on language teaching or acting as a bridge between linguistics and language teaching. Carl (1993) viewed applied linguistics as an interface addressing the no man’s land between linguistics and teaching methodology. He also raised the idea that applied linguistics is a transdiscipline. He tried to make a distinction between inter discipline and transdiscipline arguing that an inter discipline results from “a convergence of two scientific theories or when several disciplines overlap” while he views a transdiscipline as “a convergence of a scientific theory with an indigenous

theory” (p. 28). Evensen (1997) developed the discussion on trans disciplines; he gave a criteria for deciding whether a given field is a trans discipline or not, “The degree to which applied linguistics is developing into a trans discipline ...may be tested by how it approaches insights reached within those neighboring disciplines” (p. 38). Though most of what has been discussed above shows an unclear position concerning applied linguistics, ideas build here form a springboard to the discussion in this paper. If viewed as a transdiscipline for example, then applied linguistics in Kenya will draw from several fields to help solve our language based problems.

According to Widdowson, an applied linguist mediates between the linguist and the language teacher. Widdowson (2000) argues that all communities develop their own distinctive ways of talking about things and that some discourses need to be inter-related by some kind of mediation, and it is at this point that the role of the applied linguist becomes significant. Why is this intervention necessary? Again as Widdowson observes, intervention or mediator role is necessary in bringing improvement, “There is need to make it [linguistics] useful, to mediate between its abstractions , its particular discourse partiality, and other discourses representing alternative versions of reality as experienced by language users and language learners”(p.8 ).

Grabe& Kaplan (1990) see applied linguistics as “a field that seeks to solve language based problems /issues” (p. 281). Brumfit (1997) gives a related definition, “The theoretical and empirical study of real world problems in which language plays a central role” (p. 93). These two definitions do not limit applied linguists to a field strictly build on linguistic theories. In fact Brumfit does not even see applied linguistics as a field but

as a big research project, that can be undertaken by people from various fields. Brumfit's definition seems to echo definitions given by Evensen (1997) and Carl (1993) both of whom view applied linguistics as a multidiscipline or even a transdiscipline welcoming people from several disciplines.

In this paper the emphasis will be on addressing these language based problems in real world, and while the other definitions given above are helpful, my working definitions will be those suggested by Grabe & Kaplan (1990) and Brumfit (1997). Traditionally, the language based problems focused on language learning, especially foreign language learning. Other areas of concentration included child language learning, adolescent language learning, adult language learning and language education in general (Pakir, 2004)

#### *Research questions*

1. What are some of the language based problems experienced in Kenya?
2. Why is language in education the most pressing real world problem?
3. What are the main issues in language in education policies?
4. What questions do applied linguists need to address?

#### *Kenya defined*

Kenya is, unmistakably, not a homogeneous society interested in the same issues, although it is a roughly defined geographical body. Kenya stretches from Turkana on the far northwest to Mombasa in the far south east occupying an estimated 580, 367 sq km (World Fact Book). Although Kenya is not a very big country, its language issues vary

so widely to an extent that its diverse linguistic contexts could almost be treated as different countries. The application of linguistics in various Kenyan contexts would definitely vary from context to context. As Cavalcanti (2004) argues, “Applied linguistics, as well as other areas of knowledge, certainly shows different faces in different countries” (p.23). The linguistic scenario of rural contexts, for example, is not in any way similar to that of the elite urban areas.

If Kenya alone were to be placed within Kachru’s concentric circles (Kachru 1985) of the existence of English globally, all the circles (Inner circle, Outer circle, Expanding circles) could be represented to some extent (Michieka, 2005, 2009 a). The elite urban areas, for example, fall in the Inner circle or native speaker context circle where some children are raised speaking English, the language of instruction, as their first language. Other urban contexts such as represented by most middle class residential areas fall in the Outer Circle where English is used mainly as a second language. A number of rural areas are clearly in the Expanding circles and English is mainly experienced as a foreign language. Generally there are three main types of English users in Africa and in Kenyan as well: monolingual English native speakers, bilingual or trilingual speakers very proficient in English as a second language and native speakers of Kenyan indigenous languages who use English as a foreign language. This last group forms the largest percentage of English users since most Kenyans reside in the rural areas.

Kenya, therefore, represents various socio-economic and historical contexts that are difficult to group together. The greatest difference has been noted in the affluent urban contexts which seem to be fundamentally different from the remote rural settings, and

therefore necessitating a contextualized treatment. The discussion here does not, in any way, imply that the spread of the English language is the only concern in Kenya.

Just like in many African countries, Kenya struggles with several language issues including use of a language of instruction that is foreign to a majority of the learners. Adebija (1994) observes several characteristics of the language scenario in Africa such as the dense multilingualism, the persistent use of a colonial language as an official language, the general neglect of indigenous languages, the continued dependence on former colonial masters and the existence of a complex network of socio-politically intertwined language related problems (p.15). These same problems plague Kenya.

*Language based real world problems in Kenya*

Webb and Sure (2000) have defined language based problems as “problems in the domains of education, the economy, politics and social life but with a clear language component” (p.3). The language based problems are not language problems nor do they have anything to do with the nature of language, instead these are problems that go beyond the way people use language. These problems may not seem to be directly related to language but at the very core of each problem is an issue to do with language.

Four main language based issues can be addressed here, and although they may appear farfetched, they are all language related problems: Limited access to knowledge and skills, limited productivity in workplace, limited participation and linguistic and cultural alienation (Webb & Sure, 2000 p. 4).

How are all these problems listed above language based problems? What role does language play in promoting or limiting access to knowledge? Most people could generally agree that the ability to comprehend information depends, to a large degree, on the language medium. Even extremely intelligent people will be at a loss if information is communicated to them in a language they do not know or one they have not mastered well. In the Kenyan scenario, education, which is a way of transmitting knowledge, skills and culture, is mainly communicated in a language that is not yet fully mastered by the majority of students. The end product is bound to be affected, although it may be reasoned out that gradually the students master English, their language of instruction. At this point, the question for the researcher is what level of proficiency needs to be attained before a language can be used adequately to communicate cognitive skills? The problem of the language of instruction spills over to several aspects of life affecting the work place and participation in politics.

The languages of education are also the workplace languages, and as long as the working mass has not mastered this language, overall productivity will be affected. Webb and Sure (2000) give an example of the work force in South Africa where 50% of the trainers used English even though most of the workers were illiterate and would not understand the language of their trainers. Other work related communication was also done in English with no translation given. The workers, therefore, did not understand their contracts and maybe did not even know what they were getting into when they took up the jobs. There is all the likelihood that there will be much frustration with such jobs and extra workforce



maybe needed to explain rules and instructions, and in the long run labor ends up being redundant and inefficient.

The same language problems are experienced in other areas such as in politics. If people do not understand the language of politics in their country, then they cannot effectively participate in their national politics. English and Kiswahili, the two languages of politics in Kenya are both, to some extent, foreign to a number of Kenyans, especially those from the rural contexts. It is impossible to offer any useful contributions to political systems if one does not understand how these systems run. Several injustices and various kinds of discrimination will continue to be experienced because those undergoing these problems do not have a language to voice their concerns.

With all these language related problems, the other resulting problem is a language shift that finally leads to cultural alienation and loss of identity. Once people realize that they have to acquire a given language in order to participate in official affairs, they may resort to directing every effort into the learning and acquisition of this language with a resulting shift from the local languages. What does that mean in terms of one's cultural identity? Mesthrie (2000) in his discussion of the relationship between language and society says that speakers of a given language do not just use language for conveying meaning even if that is the primary role of language, many times they will give signals concerning several aspects such as social class, region of origin and age group. A language acts as a symbol of a group's uniqueness; it is a symbol of group membership (Obeng & Adegbija 1999; Bekker, 2003). If there is a language shift, there will also be a shift in membership leading to alienation from one's group. Children who grow up speaking English, the school

language, may alienate their illiterate parents and relatives. Many Kenyan parents living in urban areas will admit that there is already an alienation taking place between children and their grandparents or other family members who have no proficiency in the urban lingua francas. It is not uncommon to find families where grandparents can no longer find a common language to communicate with their grandchildren. In a recent study conducted among Kenyan university students, many Kenyan youths admit and regretfully so, to having little or no proficiency in their ethnic languages (Michieka, 2010).

#### *Language in education*

Yahya-Othman (1989) has argued that language is an indispensable component in the development process. Decisions made concerning the language of instruction will impact the overall educational outcome and consequently the development or underdevelopment of a country. Education cannot be possible without a language and the question of which language is selected is very crucial. Trappes-Lomax (1990) lists several factors that should be considered in choosing a language of instruction:

- The language should be codified/ standardized
- It should be accepted by parties involved ( teachers, parents pupils, society)
- Has to be teachable ( availability of teachers and teaching materials)
- The language should be experienced in use (should be functionally important outside the educational system) (p. 94).

Trappes-Lomax raises several important issues here concerning a choice of a medium of instruction. His argument, which I definitely support, is that, this language should be

accessible to the students and to the society for that is the only way it can be experienced outside the educational system. It should be a language used at home, in the neighborhood, and in other social settings. If it is a codified language, it will also be easily accessible in print and in the media, both to the learners and the rest of the public. It can also be inferred from Trappex-Lomax's statement that this language should either be a first language of the students or a well developed second language as contrasted to a foreign language.

Trappes- Lomax (1990) defines a foreign language as a language which is non indigenous to a particular community. It is not a mother tongue of its speakers, and, unlike a second language, it is not used within the speech community. This defines the situation of English in Kenya and even Kiswahili in a number of parts of Kenya. For most students in Kenya, the school is the primary domain in which they get most of their exposure to English, often delivered by teachers who in most cases themselves may not be very proficient. It is also true that the language of education is not easily available outside the educational system due to high levels of illiteracy. From my personal experience of being raised in a rural context, I know that English was an alien language that I only encountered in school. I also know that, even though the use of English was strongly imposed in the schools, for practical purposes, the teachers often used our ethnic language in the classrooms to get their messages across to us. The same concern involves Kiswahili too. Although most Kenyans claim to be proficient in Kiswahili, there are still several people in Kenya who can hardly sustain a coherent conversation in Kiswahili,

especially is they have not been raised anywhere close to the multilingual urban or suburban areas.

*Why has English persisted as a language of instruction?*

Several reasons can be given for the persistent use of English in our educational policies. English happens to be better codified in comparison with the local languages and, therefore, making it easily available as a language of instruction (Bamgbose, 2003).

The global issues also greatly promote the use of English. Questions are raised over who the use of a Kenyan indigenous language is going to benefit should it be selected as a medium of instruction. Even if people were to be given a choice between an indigenous language and English, for example, they may still opt for English because they are aware of the advantages English confers on them. So, for the practical uses of some of this language, English remains a “recurring decimal” (Bamgbose (2003) in language policies.

A study of language attitudes among rural Kisii students shows that learners are aware of the benefits of mastering English. Students argued that mastery of Ekegusii, their indigenous language was not necessary, Ekegusii, they argued “will not take us anywhere” (Michieka, 2009 b). These attitudes continue to give English a privileged status.

Elitism has also contributed to the maintenance of English in Kenya. Yahya Othman argues that the elites who have gained such status through an official language fear losing such power, if another language is given official status. So, to maintain their power they insist on the use of English. Most opinion leaders and policy makers have been educated

in English and would like to maintain that status quo ( Yahya-Othman (1989). There will always be concern about how the elite could be affected if local languages were to hold equal status as English.

*Concerns for Kenyan linguists*

Kenyan applied linguists need to address these problems raised here and other language concerns. In this conclusion part I raise several concerns that call for the attention of Kenyan linguists. This is not a problem we can leave entirely to the politicians.

- What is the status of English in most Kenyan contexts? Can it truly be viewed as a strong second language and thus justified to be used as a medium of instruction? Can rural Kenyan learners claim English as their strong second language? And if English is truly a foreign language in some Kenyan contexts, can we justify the use of a foreign language as a medium of education? ( See Trappes-Lomax 1989:97)
- Are there any known psychological and cognitive concerns associated with use of a foreign language in instruction? What impact does such a practice have on the learners' acquisition of cognitive knowledge?
- Are there any predictable consequences of using a foreign language as a medium of education? It is obvious, for example, that it does not take a prophet to predict that remote rural districts will never outperform elite schools in the English language national examinations. While there are definitely other factors that

contribute to these disparities in performance, language unquestionably plays a significant role.

- Is there any relationship between the underdevelopment in most Kenyan areas and the choice of the language of instruction? Is Kenya's underdevelopment a language based problem?
- Can the deficiencies associated with using a foreign language for instruction be overcome? For practical reasons, replacing English with a local language might not be the easiest option but maybe it could help to equip learners with a strong background in their first languages and teach English as a strong foreign or second language. Many developed countries around the world instruct their learners in their native languages and introduce English or some other international language as a foreign language. Germany, for instance, raises very proficient English speakers and users, yet the country continues to use its native language for instruction.

Findings from these research areas will be of significant importance to Kenya. The nature of research required here involves applied linguists and collaborations with researchers from diverse disciplines. This is not work that can be accomplished by language teachers only or by curriculum planners. These linguistic problems go beyond the realm of the politician. Fortunately this discourse has already started among several Kenyan scholars and other interested parties as evidenced in recent publications (Kioko, A. & Muthwii, M. 2001; Mulama, 2006; Musau, 2003; Sure & Ogechi, 2009). Most significantly too, our

new constitution that places Kiswahili at par with English in the official language domain is also a step forward.

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