

Analysis and Review of Evolution and Development of Language Policies in Kenya

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Abstract: The role of education policy is crucial in determining improved access to education as it provides standards that guide educational practice. In Kenya, for instance, language policies provide guidelines on the language to use at the different levels of education with clear guidelines for use of each of the relevant languages: English, Kiswahili and vernaculars. These policies are well-meaning and have far reaching impact on classroom practices. Although some of the policies have promoted achievement in language proficiency, others have not. This paper examines the Kenya national language policies, to determine their impact on English language teaching and learning. In the paper, policy documents and provisions relating to evolution and development of languages of instruction at primary and secondary school levels are analysed. The paper analyses the language policies from the colonial to post-colonial era in Kenya. Language policy in Kenya cannot be addressed without a historical perspective regarding establishment of western education. It is recommended in this paper that there is need for a comprehensive language policy to streamline language use and thereby overcome the confusion that results from contradicting directives relating to language use in Kenya which are issued from time-to-time.

Key words: National policies, standards, language

Introduction

Kenya, like other countries has sound policies and laws that are critical for maintenance of order of the country. There are systems at various levels that allow for planning and action. Although Kenya does not have one comprehensive document on language policy per se (Kioko, 2013), there are provisions regarding language use in the constitution and other policies like the education policy on languages of instruction. There are also various sessional papers and reports

of various education commissions e.g the Mackay Report (1981) and Gachathi Report (1976) that have addressed language use and management over time, from the arrival of Christian missionaries in the early 20th century. These policies provide the basis for planning of issues relating to language use in the education sector. They provide for the medium to use for teaching and learning; and programs to be followed as well as the teaching and learning resources to be used at different levels of the education system. This is in a bid to provide quality education although this may not always be achieved for all learners due to various disparities and constraints.

Background

The policies that relate to language in Kenya, like in many African countries have largely been about medium of instruction since pre-colonial times to date. Language use policies are largely dictated by the objectives and interests of those in power. For instance the missionaries needed to spread Christianity and thus the United Mission Conference of 1909 was the first to recommend the use of English in higher education in Kenya, and mother languages to be used in the first three years of primary schooling (Wendo, 2009). Kiswahili was to be used in the two intermediate years of school. Both the Phelps-Stokes commission of 1924 and the Beecher report of 1949 dealt Kiswahili a big blow when they removed it from mainstream usage in the education system reducing it to an examinable, even optional subject. They preferred the use of different mother languages and introduced their own English language, as they possibly feared that Kiswahili would unite Kenyans to rise against colonial rule. Learners had to struggle to learn English, even though for some, Kiswahili was their mother language. This may have compromised standards of teaching and learning because African teachers were not well versed with English. All exams were set in English from 1952 (as a result of recommendations of the Beecher report, 1949).

By independence, Kiswahili was not widely used by the population in Kenya, and English had been pushed to elite levels that most aspired for but few achieved (Mbaabu, 1996). Little was done by subsequent policies and commissions, to change this as exams were still set in English and Kiswahili remained one of the subjects taught. By this time even lower primary school pupils (Grade 1-3), were required to use English which they could hardly understand, because of

many reasons, pointed out in Ngugi (2012) and Kioko (2013). Some of the reasons cited include resistance by parents to have vernacular used because they thought this would retard their children's progress in English, lack of standardization of various dialects and therefore disagreement on which to use for education purposes and lack or poor development of African languages, hence limited scientific vocabulary, as well as absence of written material for teaching and learning. This was despite the fact that Kiswahili was fronted as the National language with the role of creating national and social integration. This did not happen because English became the language of the elite who moved miles away from the commoners that used Kiswahili (Ogechi & Ogechi, 2002). The standards of education were not good across the board because exams were set in English, (Kioko, 2013). The results were poor for the majority because their competence in English was low.

Although in 1974, Kenya African National Union (KANU), the then ruling party declared Kiswahili a parliamentary language alongside English, not many members of parliament and other political leaders can express themselves in the language. For example, while addressing people in Kibera, a low income settlement area of Nairobi, in November 2014, the community requested the Cabinet secretary for Devolution and Planning to use Kiswahili language as they could not grasp what she was saying in English. The minister, visibly exasperated, declared she would try and went ahead 'to try' to use Kiswahili with little success. The Bill of rights (Kenya constitution, 2010) stipulates that the accused should be tried in a language they understand. Due to the elitist nature of the legal system, some judges cannot express themselves fully in Kiswahili, and a miscarriage of justice may result if the accused do not comprehend English well. This issue goes back to the relationship between policy and Language and education standards. Education should linguistically address the needs of the population to communicate while acquiring skills and knowledge. This paper seeks to explore whether the language policies will bolster performance of English, and hence achieve this objective. In the following sections, analysis of the various language policy provisions is done with a view to clarify the origins of the inconsistencies regarding language policy and the impact it may have on performance standards in education.

Pre- independence Education Policies

The policies governing the use of language in education have their roots in colonial Kenya (Wendo, 2009). The first ever language policy discourse in the country was at the United Mission Conference. At the time the missionaries who were the main players in the conference were interested in spreading Christianity among the local population. At that time there wasn't a big distinction between religion and the colonial state such that they fostered each other's agenda. The conference held in 1909 laid the foundation of language use in Kenya, and the recommendations of the conference had a big impact on how we use the different languages in our education system today. At the conference it was declared that mother languages of the catchment area be used in the first three years of learning in primary school as this would facilitate spread of Christianity (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). Upon transitioning to middle school for the next two years (grade 4 and 5), Kiswahili was used. English was introduced as the language of instruction thereafter from grade 6 onwards. Not many learners grasped it because the teachers were few apart and resources for teaching in any of these languages were minimal. The uptake of English was slow (Gorman, 1974). This was the beginning of disparities in society because those who proceeded to middle school, and beyond were not many. The few that did could speak some English and got government jobs and became the elite in society (Wendo, 2009).

Following the United Mission Conference which laid the foundation of language use in Kenya in 1909, the government commissioned the Phelps-Stocks Commission in 1924 after the Second World War to review the language policy. The colonial government grew apprehensive because if the local people communicated well in English and Kiswahili, it would override their main objective of giving the locals enough education suitable only to develop low cadre manpower for them. Wendo, posits that "social distance had to be maintained between colonial master and colonized servant,"(2009, p. 124).

The Phelps-Stokes Commission recommended that Kiswahili should only be used where it was the vernacular of the area. Consequently it was dropped from the education system, but English was retained as the language of instruction in upper classes. However, there weren't enough teachers to carry out this mandate of teaching in English for local Kenyans because the colonial government had introduced racism in education, and set up separate schools for whites, Indians and Africans (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998, Kioko 2013). The education provided to the Africans was very basic: merely to communicate with the white master enough for government to run. As a result of the recommendations of the Phelps-Stokes Commission, English was to be taught to Africans guardedly, so that not many got to secondary school and beyond. This created economic classes in the country, (Wendo, 2009: pp124), and retarded the spread of English. The local Kenyans realized that English gave them a ticket to a better life than doing menial jobs for the white man, and set up their own independent schools where they encouraged their children to learn English (Whiteley 1974, Kioko 2013).

In 1935, the colonial government issued a circular directing that public schools use only mother languages namely, Kikuyu, Kiswahili, Luo and Luhya in lower primary school (Ngugi, 2012), (20 Kenyan languages were later accepted for medium of instruction, (Kioko, 2013)). Learners from areas that used none of these languages were forced to use English as the medium of instruction from their first day in school. This went against the recommendations of the Phelps-stokes commission which had recommended use of all mother languages for the first three years of primary education. This directive created even more ambivalences and led to some smaller tribes like the Ogiek being amalgamated (swallowed) by other bigger tribes.

After World War II, the White colonial master saw the looming loss of power in Kenya because, as in other colonized countries, Kenyans had united against the colonial rule and were agitating for independence (Wendo, 2009). As a result, the government set up the Beecher education commission in 1949 to advice on the way forward. The Beecher report of 1949 reinstated Kiswahili and made it an alternative medium of examination. English was retained as the language of instruction from intermediate school, while mother languages continued being the medium of learning for the first three years of primary school. Soon after, in 1952, English was

the only medium through which examinations were administered and this boosted its status while lowering that of Kiswahili. Kiswahili had been encouraged by the colonial administration alongside English prior to 1953. In 1953, it was banned in favour of the mother languages (Mbaabu, 1987). This was due to the clamour for independence and thus, the colonial master did not want people to communicate easily between communities. However, the colonialist needed some elite Kenyans to propagate their interests in Kenya, should independence come, and thus allowed use of English in the school system.

There were other pre-independent education reports such as Binns Report of 1952 and Drogheda Report of 1952 which recommended that English should be introduced from lower primary school as a subject (Gorman, 1974). Mazrui & Mazrui explain that the colonial master dropped Kiswahili from the education syllabus altogether because it was seen as the medium of mobilization for the struggle for independence. This boosted the status of English. The English exclusionist status was further enhanced by the recommendations of Prator-Hutosoit Commission of 1952 which directed that only English should be in use as the medium of instruction in Kenyan schools at all levels. This report gave birth to the English medium Approach where teachers were trained only in English language and all instruction given in it (Wendo, 2009).

The pre independence language policy was often ambivalent because the three competing languages in the education system namely mother languages, Kiswahili and English were encouraged and discouraged frequently, and it was impossible to create teaching and learning personnel and resources with the same vigour. This compromised standards of Education for Kenyans. Noteworthy, however, at this point the colonial master's objective was not to enable high standards of learning for the local Kenyans, but rather to subdue and at the same time have few Kenyans who could foster the White master's interests. Wendo (2009) speaks of this "fear of Europeanization of Africans, lest they become too educated to accept the wage of labourers." (pp123).

Post-independent Kenya Language Policies

After Kenya's independence in 1963, the new government constituted the Ominde Commission in 1964 to advise on education matters. As it was common practice among newly independent African nations to 'honour' the colonial masters' languages (OAU, 1985), the commission recommended that English should be the official language, and subsequently be used as the language of instruction from lower primary school all through the education system. Kioko, (2013) calls this recommendation 'shocking' as it is hard to imagine a little child coming to school for the first time and being bombarded with a new language. The learner as well as the teacher had a rough time because even the teacher training was done in English and any available teaching resources were in English. Mother languages were used in a story telling session, once a week. The standard of English eventually rose considerably because the government was determined to train indigenous Kenyans to take on the roles the colonial master had left and so more resources were pumped into the education system. Teacher training colleges were established and more schools built. The Kenya Institute of Education was established in 1967 (Wendo, 2009) and charged with developing material for teaching and learning, among other things. The books were written in English because it was the only language of instruction at the time, although Kiswahili remained a non-examinable subject in school.

Kioko (2013) states that the government soon realized the mistake of having English as the medium of instruction from the first day of school and set up the Gachathi Commission to relook at this policy, (Kioko, 2013). This commission was established in 1976. There was need to bolster our languages because 'there were foreign governments who were quietly expending resources in the teaching of their languages' (Mbithi, 2014) (the foreign languages including English, French, German). It recommended that English continues to be the language of instruction but only at upper primary school. The vernacular languages were established as the medium of instruction for lower primary school, and Kiswahili was made an examinable subject at the end of primary school. This had overall impact on the uptake and teaching of English

because research shows that learners perform better if they are first taught in the language they know. Kioko, et al. (2014) posit that “an education that is packaged in a language which the child does not understand is simply torture to the child” (pp 2). Nyarigoti and Ambiyu, (2014) argue that learning in the mother language does not hinder children’s opportunity to learn English. By the time the teaching transitions to English, they have a fair grasp of the language and will perform better in English as well.

The recommendations of the Gachathi Commission would have had great impact of a positive impact on education standards but ‘stakeholders were resistant (Wendo, 2009) and preferred that English should be the medium of instruction in schools. It retained the bigger chunk of time allocation in the school timetable, and its superior, even elite status. Although mother languages were to be the medium of instruction in primary 1-3, they were stigmatized, and used mainly in rural areas (Wendo, 2009). This did not help the standards of English because the learned few who could use proper English were alienated from the masses leading to a mixed form of communication that combines English, Kiswahili and mother languages, commonly referred to as Sheng. Many education stake holders blame widespread use of Sheng among learners for poor standards of English and Kiswahili

Because the education system had become elitist, graduating people who abhorred blue collar jobs, the government established the Mackay Commission in 1981 to advice on the way forward. It had a wide mandate, including working out modalities of establishing a second university in Kenya, among other things. It recommended that Kenyatta University be established and a faculty of indigenous languages and Kiswahili be set up. It changed the earlier recommendations and reinstated Kiswahili in the education system, making it compulsory and examinable through to high school. This commission recommended restructuring of the education system to 8-4-4 (Kioko, 2013), but did not change policy as pertains to English language. Before the Mackay Commission, teachers had not been trained in African languages, but were expected to teach in mother languages and Kiswahili.

Policy paper of 1999

The government, in 1999, through a Policy Paper officially recognized the indigenous languages and provided a framework for incorporating them into the formal education system (Njoroge, 2008). This policy also integrated English and literature which had earlier on been taught as distinct subjects. This meant that the learner had more contact hours with the teacher of English language. With reduced learner- teacher contact hours, from the year 2002 henceforth, the standards of English have continued to fall. "There is plenty of evidence of poor mastery of the English language: in the local newspapers, on television, inside the class room, and predictably, in the falling standards of education". (Mbithi, 2014, 8). English has consistently posted poor results in KCSE, and perhaps this is partly attributable to this policy which integrated English language and literature into one subject. Kioko (2013) found that teachers are unhappy with integration and blame the literature subject for poor results of English language. It can be argued that if teachers are unhappy with certain provisions in policy regarding their subject, then there is likely to be low morale and lack of enthusiasm in their teaching practice.

The Kenya Constitution and related current practices

The Kenyan constitution is hailed as the single document that comprehensively articulates policy on language use in Kenya to date (Republic of Kenya, 2010). It stipulates language utilization in Kenya for all citizens. Alternative media of communication in the education system is fronted for people with different challenges. The Bill of Rights states that every Kenyan has a right to education. The government should provide access to education for all. The deaf and visually impaired learners should have access to sign language, Braille machines and other relevant assistive equipment (Kioko, 2013).

Policy and practice are worlds apart in this situation because of lack of access to the provisions of the constitution. There are neither enough trained teachers to handle learners with disabilities, nor are there resources that can encourage access to quality education. Teaching of English should be a priority even for learners with challenges, but it must begin with training the English

teachers in Braille and Kenya sign language for overall educational performance standards to improve.

In Chapter 2, Article 7, The Kenya Constitution has elevated Kiswahili to an official language, giving it equal rights as English (Republic of Kenya, 2010). This is unlike colonial government that shunned indigenous languages in preference for their own English language (Ngugi, 2012). This constitutional provision implies that Kiswahili should be used in all sectors that English is currently used including education. It means that teaching and learning should be done using both English and Kiswahili, and exams should also be set in both languages. This would possibly trim the all importance attached to English and upgrade Kiswahili as an important language. For this constitutional provision to be realized, not only do we need affirmative action but also an overhaul of the relevant resource provision so that teaching and learning material, legal material, parliamentary material like the Hansard, etc. should be prepared in Kiswahili, as they are in English. Standards of English would improve simultaneously with those of Kiswahili because if there is no stigma in using Kiswahili, learners will grasp the concepts faster even before they come to English. By the time they are fully studying in English in upper primary, they will be comfortable expressing themselves without any negative labels.

The government insists that mother languages should be used for instruction for the first three years of learning. This follows on the recommendations of pre-independence education commissions. If this is implemented, the learners will use vernacular as English is taught as a subject in lower primary school. Research shows that if learners are taught in the language they understand for the first three years, they adapt to school more easily and learning progresses quickly (Kioko, 2014). This would improve standards of English in the sense that learners will comprehend better and will be able to use English in other subjects, bolstering performance. However, this may be impeded by resource gaps due to tight budgets that do not encourage government to produce learning and teaching resources, and to employ more English teachers. In this computer era, teaching English can benefit from applications that learners could access even when they are not in school, rather than relying on teacher contact hours which are limited. The government, in the current constitution encourages use of ICT in all sectors, but schools have not been facilitated with infrastructure to enable this, and the intended laptop project for learners

from in primary school is still a mirage. It hampers the use of new media in teaching of English which would greatly improve standards since learners would not need to rely on the limited face to face teacher learner contact time.

Teaching requirements for English language teachers

The major employer for teachers in Kenya, the Teachers Service Commission requires that in high school, every English teacher should have two teaching subjects. The English teacher, unlike before has to teach English (plus literature) and another subject (TSC Code, 2005). This has affected performance because English being a language requires that a teacher performs a myriad of learning activities and continually marks learner's written work. If such a teacher should teach English language, literature and another subject, the teacher is overworked and too demoralized to go the extra mile for the sake of the learner.

The teachers' Code of Regulations (2005) requires that a teacher should teach anywhere in the country and yet the government policy says learners should be taught in their mother languages in non-urban areas for the first three years of primary school. Such policy provisions and operational guidelines are contradictory and do not augur well for educational practice and the aspiration for quality education. Based on the language policy analysis, some recommendations are suggested in the following section.

Recommendations and conclusion

Based on the analysis and review of the evolution and development of language use policies in education in Kenya, some recommendations are presented in this paper. First of all, it is appreciated that Kenya government has in place regulations that impact English language teaching and learning. Whereas this regulatory framework has gone a long way in providing guidelines necessary for teaching English, there is need for review in order to improve the standards of English in the country. To begin with, a comprehensive Language policy should be

provided by government to guide language use not only in the education sector but across the country.

Secondly, it is recommended that it would be worthwhile to review all the fragmented existing language policy guidelines and directives so that they do not contradict each other. For instance, as evident in the analysis in this paper, the provision that a teacher should teach in any part of the country is contradictory in that the same teacher cannot effectively teach a beginning learner in the learners' mother language if the teacher has a different mother language.

Thirdly, linking policy to practice, there is evident further confusion as it is not clear how the transition from mother languages as media of instruction up to standard three should be made to English from standard four onwards. It is therefore recommended that capacity building should be a continuous and ongoing part of the implementation of language policies in practice to empower teachers deliver in practice, particularly regarding transition from lower to upper primary teaching when the language of instruction changes from mother tongues to English.

Forthly, it is recommended that not only do we need affirmative action but also an overhaul of the relevant resource provisions so that teaching and learning material, legal material, parliamentary material like the Hansard, etc should be prepared in Kiswahili, as they are in English. Such affirmative action will contribute greatly towards realization of the provisions in the Kenyan constitution regarding the use of English and Kiswahili languages.

Finally, it is recommended that with the current advancements in ICT, language teaching can benefit a lot from integration of ICT in teaching and learning across the levels of the education system. The relevant government organs should not only hasten provision of the necessary ICT tools to be integrated in teaching, but they should also provide for ICT use through a comprehensive policy on language use in education.

In conclusion, it is clear arising from the analysis and review in this paper that language is a critical component not only in the education sector but also as a key medium of human communication. As such all other human activities are predicated on language use. Language policy provision cannot therefore be overstated. The government of Kenya has the important task of ensuring that language policy is provided for to guide practice.

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